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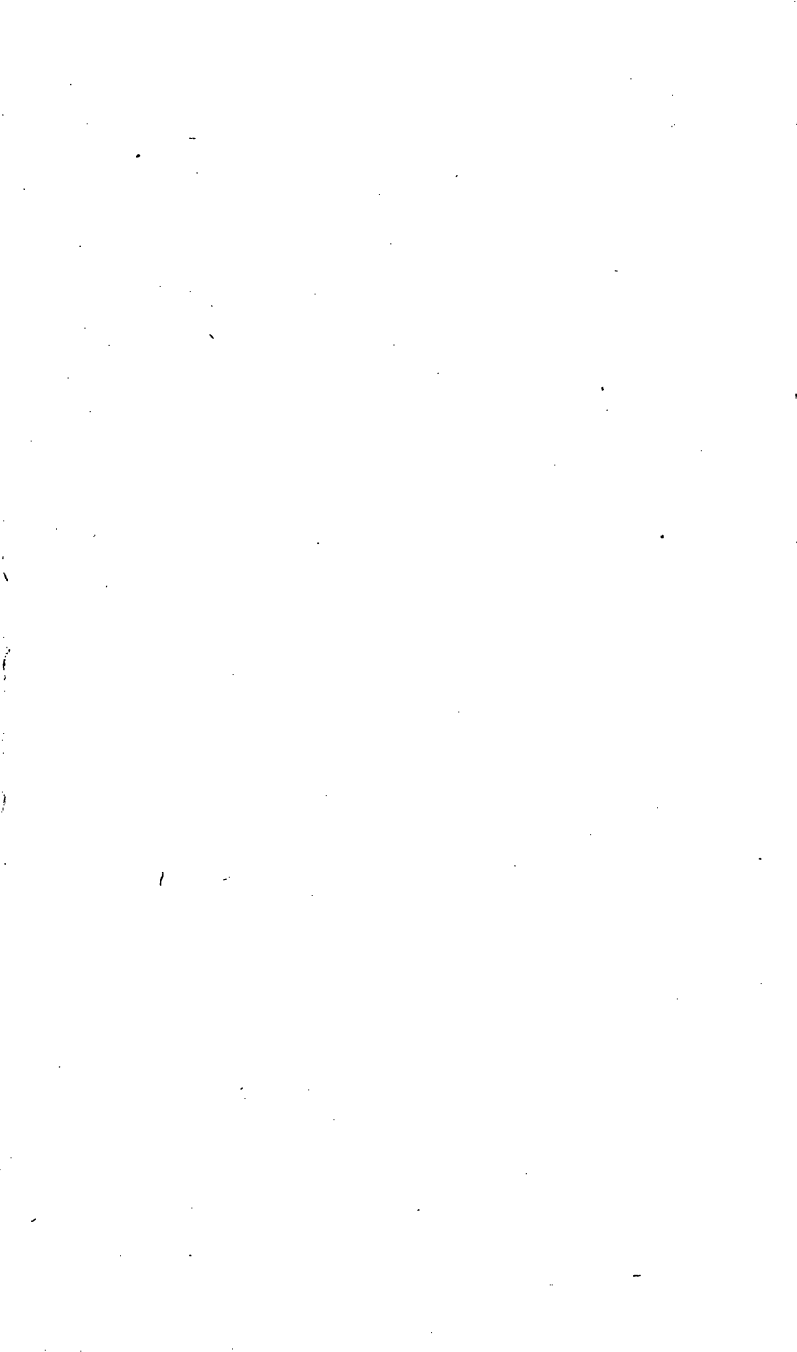
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MOTHER EARTH

Isaac Asimov

"BUT CAN YOU be certain? Are you sure that even a professional historian can always distinguish between victory and defeat?"

Gustav Stein, who delivered himself of that mocking question with a whiskered smile and a gentle wipe at the gray mustache from the neighborhood of which he had just removed an empty glass, was not an historian. He was a physiologist.

But his companion *was* an historian, and he accepted the gentle thrust with a smile of his own.

Stein's apartment was, for Earth, quite luxurious. It lacked the empty privacy of the Outer Worlds, of course, since from its window there stretched outward a phenomenon that belonged only to the home planet—a city. A large city, full of people; rubbing shoulders, mingling sweat—

Nor was Stein's apartment fitted with its own power and its own utility supply. It lacked even the most elementary quota of positronic robots. In short, it lacked the dignity of self-sufficiency, and like all things on Earth, it was merely part of a community, a pendant unit of a cluster, a portion of a mob.

But Stein was an Earthman by birth and used to it. And after all, by Earth standards, the apartment was still luxurious.

It was just that looking outward through the same windows before which lay the city, one could see the stars and among them the Outer Worlds, where there were no cities but only gardens; where the lawns were streaks of emerald, where all human beings were kings, and where all good Earthmen earnestly and vainly hoped to go some day.

Except for a few who knew better—like Gustav Stein.

The Friday evenings with Edward Field belonged to that class of ritual which comes with age and quiet life. It broke the week pleasantly for two elderly bachelors, and gave them an innocuous reason to linger over the sherry and the stars. It took them away from the crudities of life, and, most of all, it let them talk.

Field, especially, as a lecturer, scholar and man of modest means quoted chapter and verse from his still uncompleted history of Terrestrial Empire.

"I wait for the last act," he explained. "Then I can call it the 'Decline and Fall of Empire' and publish it."

"You must expect the last act to come soon, then."

"In a sense, it has come already. It is just that it is best to wait for all to recognize that fact. You see, there are three times when an Empire or an Economic System or a Social Institution falls, you skeptic—"

Field paused for effect and waited patiently for Stein to say, "And those times are?"

"First," Field ticked off a right forefinger, "there is the time when just a little nub shows up that points an inexorable way to finality. It can't be seen or recognized until the finality arrives, when the original nub becomes visible to hindsight."

"And you can tell what that little nub is?"

"I think so, since I already have the advantage of a century and a half of hindsight. It came when the Sirian sector colony, Aurora, first obtained permission of the Central Government at Earth to introduce positronic robots into their community life. Obviously, looking back at it, the road was clear for the development of a thoroughly mechanized society based upon robot labor and not human labor. And it is this mechanization that has been and will yet be the deciding factor in the struggle between the Outer Worlds and Earth."

"It is?" murmured the physiologist. "How infernally

clever you historians are. What and where is the second time the Empire fell?"

"The second point in time," and Field gently bent his right middle finger backward, "arrives when a signpost is raised for the expert so large and plain that it can be seen even without the aid of perspective. And that point has been passed, too, with the first establishment of an immigration quota against Earth by the Outer Worlds. The fact that Earth found itself unable to prevent an action so obviously detrimental to itself was a shout for all to hear, and that was fifty years ago."

"Better and better. And the third point?"

"The third point?" Down went the ring finger. "That is the least important. That is when the signpost becomes a wall with a huge 'The End' scrawled upon it. The only requirement for knowing that the end has come then is neither perspective nor training, but merely the ability to listen to the video."

"I take it then, that the third point in time has not yet come."

"Obviously not, or you would not need to ask. Yet it may come soon, for instance, if there is war."

"Do you think there will be?"

Field avoided commitment. "Times are unsettled, and a good deal of futile emotion is sweeping Earth on the immigration question. And if there should be a war, Earth would be defeated quickly and lastingly, and the wall would be erected."

"Can you be certain? Are you sure that even a professional historian can always distinguish between victory and defeat?"

Field smiled. He said: "You may know something I do not. For instance, they talk about something called the 'Pacific Project'."

"I never heard of it." Stein refilled the two glasses, "Let us speak of other things."

He held up his glass to the broad window so that the far stars flickered rosily in the clear liquid and said: "To a happy ending to Earth's troubles."

Field held up his own. "To the Pacific Project."

Stein sipped gently and said: "But we drink to two different things."

"Do we?"

It is quite difficult to describe any of the Outer Worlds to a native Earthman, since it is not so much a description of a world that is required as a description of a state of mind. The Outer Worlds—some fifty of them, originally colonies, later dominions, later nations—differ extremely among themselves in a physical sense. But the state of mind is somewhat the same throughout.

It is something that grows out of a world not originally congenial to mankind, yet populated by the cream of the difficult, the different, the daring, the defiant.

If it is to be expressed in a word, that word is "individuality."

There is the world of Aurora, for instance, three parsecs from Earth. It was the first planet settled outside the Solar System, and represented the dawn of interstellar travel. Hence its name.

It had air and water to start with, perhaps, but on Earthly standards, it was rocky and infertile. The plant life that did exist, sustained by a yellow-green pigment completely unrelated to chlorophyll, and not as efficient, gave the comparatively fertile regions a decidedly bilious and unpleasant appearance to unaccustomed eyes. No animal life higher than unicellular, and the equivalent of bacteria, as well, were present. Nothing dangerous naturally, since the two biological systems, of Earth and Aurora, were chemically unrelated.

Aurora became, quite gradually, a patchwork. Grains and fruit trees came first; shrubs, flowers, and grass afterward. Herds of livestock followed. And, as if it were necessary to prevent too close a copy of the mother planet, positronic robots also came to build the mansions, carve the landscapes, lay the power units. In short, to do the work, and turn the planet green and human.

There was the luxury of a new world and unlimited mineral resources. There was the splendid excess of atomic power laid out on new foundations with merely thousands, not billions, to service. There was the vast flowering of physical science, in worlds where there was room for it.

Take the home of Franklin Maynard, for instance, who, with his wife, three children, and twenty-seven robots lived on an estate more than forty miles away, in distance, from the nearest neighbor. Yet by community-wave he could,

if he wished, share the living room of any of the seventy-five million on Aurora—with each singly; with all simultaneously.

Maynard knew every inch of his valley. He knew just where it ended, sharply, and gave way to the alien crags, along whose undesirable slopes the angular, sharp leaves of the native furze clung sullenly—as if in hatred of the softer matter that had usurped its place in the sun.

Maynard did not have to leave that valley. He was a deputy in the Gathering, and a member of the Foreign Agents Committee, but he could transact all business, but the most extremely essential, by community-wave, without ever sacrificing that precious privacy he had to have in a way no Earthman could understand.

Even the present business could be performed by community-wave. The man, for instance, who sat with him in his living room, was Charles Hijkman, and he, actually, was sitting in his own living room on an island in an artificial lake stocked with fifty varieties of fish, which happened to be twenty-five hundred miles distant, in space.

The connection was an illusion, of course. If Maynard were to reach out a hand, he could feel the invisible wall.

Even the robots were quite accustomed to the paradox, and when Hijkman raised a hand for a cigarette, Maynard's robot made no move to satisfy the desire, though a half-minute passed before Hijkman's own robot could do so.

The two men spoke like Outer Worlders, that is, stiffly and in syllables too clipped to be friendly, and yet certainly not hostile. Merely undefinably lacking in the cream—however sour and thin at times—of human sociability which is so forced upon the inhabitants of Earth's ant heaps.

Maynard said: "I have long wanted a private communion, Hijkman. My duties in the Gathering, this year—"

"Quite. That is understood. You are welcome now, of course. In fact, especially so, since I have heard of the superior nature of your grounds and landscaping. Is it true that your cattle are fed on imported grass?"

"I'm afraid that is a slight exaggeration. Actually, certain of my best milkers feed on Terrestrial imports during calving time, but such a procedure would be prohibitively expensive, I'm afraid, if made general. It yields quite extra-

ordinary milk, however. May I have the privilege of sending you a day's output?"

"It would be most kind of you." Hijkmán bent his head, gravely. "You must receive some of my salmon in return."

To a Terrestrial eye, the two men might have appeared much alike. Both were tall, though not unusually so for Aurora, where the average height of the adult male is six feet one and one half inches. Both were blond and hard-muscled, with sharp and pronounced features. Though neither was younger than forty, middle-age as yet sat lightly upon them.

So much for amenities. Without a change in tone, Maynard proceeded to the serious purpose of his call.

He said: "The Committee, you know, is now largely engaged with Moreanu and his Conservatives. We would like to deal with them firmly, we of the Independents, that is. But before we can do so with requisite calm and certainty, I would like to ask you certain questions."

"Why me?"

"Because you are Aurora's most important physicist."

Modesty is an unnatural attitude, and one which is only with difficulty taught to children. In an individualistic society it is useless and Hijkmán was, therefore, unencumbered with it. He simply nodded objectively at Maynard's last words.

"And," continued Maynard, "as one of us. You are an Independent."

"I am a member of the Party. Dues-paying, but not very active."

"Nevertheless safe. Now, tell me, have you heard of the Pacific Project?"

"The Pacific Project?" There was a polite inquiry in his words.

"It is something which is taking place on Earth. The Pacific is a Terrestrial ocean, but the name itself probably has no significance."

"I have never heard of it."

"I am not surprised. Few have, even on Earth. Our communion, by the way, is via tight-beam and nothing must go further."

"I understand."

"Whatever Pacific Project is—and our agents are ex-

tremely vague—it might conceivably be a menace. Many of those who on Earth pass for scientists seem to be connected with it. Also, some of Earth's more radical and foolish politicians."

"Hm-m-m. There was once something called the Manhattan Project—"

"Yes," urged Maynard, "what about it?"

"Oh, it's an ancient thing. It merely occurred to me because of the analogy in names. The Manhattan Project was before the time of extra-terrestrial travel. Some petty war in the dark ages occurred, and it was the name given to a group of scientists who developed atomic power."

"Ah," Maynard's hand became a fist, "and what do you think the Pacific Project can do then?"

Hijkman considered. Then, softly: "Do you think Earth is planning war?"

On Maynard's face there was a sudden expression of distaste. "Six billion people. Six billion half-apes rather jammed into one system to a near-explosion point, facing only two hundred million of us, total. Don't you think it is a dangerous situation."

"Oh, numbers!"

"All right. Are we safe despite the numbers? Tell me. I'm only an administrator, and you're a physicist. *Can* Earth win a war in any way?"

Hijkman sat solemnly in his chair and thought carefully and slowly. Then he said: "Let us reason. There are three broad classes of methods whereby an individual or group can gain his ends against opposition. On an increasing level of subtlety, those three classes can be termed the physical, the biological, and the psychological.

"Now the physical can be easily eliminated. Earth does not have an industrial background. It does not have a technical know-how. It has very limited resources. It lacks even a single outstanding physical scientist. So it is as impossible as anything in the Galaxy can be that they can develop any form of physico-chemical application that is not already known to the Outer Worlds. Provided, of course, that the conditions of the problem imply single-handed opposition on the part of Earth against any or all of the Outer Worlds. I take it that none of the Outer Worlds intends leaguings with Earth against us."

Maynard indicated violent opposition even to the sugges-

tion, "No, no, no. There is no question of that. Put it out of your mind."

"Then ordinary physical surprise weapons are inconceivable. It is useless to discuss it further."

"Then what about your second class, the biological class?"

Slowly, Hijzman lifted his eyebrows: "Now that is less certain. Some Terrestrial biologists are quite competent, I am told. Naturally, since I am myself a physicist, I am not entirely qualified to judge this. Yet I believe that in certain restricted fields, they are still expert. In agricultural science, of course, to give an obvious example. And in bacteriology. Um-m-m—"

"Yes, what about bacteriological warfare?"

"A thought! But no, no, quite inconceivable. A teeming constricted world such as Earth cannot afford to fight an open latticework of fifty sparse worlds with germs. They are infinitely more subject to epidemics, that is, to retaliation in kind. In fact, I would say that given our living conditions here on Aurora and on the other Outer Worlds, no contagious disease could really take hold. No, Maynard. You can check with a bacteriologist, but I think he'll tell you the same."

Maynard said: "And the third class?"

"The psychological? Now that is unpredictable. And yet the Outer Worlds are intelligent and healthy communities and not amenable to ordinary propaganda, or for that matter to any form of unhealthy emotionalism. Now, I wonder—"

"Yes?"

"What if the Pacific Project is just that. I mean, a huge device to keep us off balance. Something top-secret, but meant to leak out in just the right fashion, so that the Outer Worlds yield a little to Earth, simply in order to play safe."

There was a longish silence.

"Impossible," burst out Maynard, angrily.

"*You* react properly. *You* hesitate. But I don't seriously press the interpretation. It is merely a thought."

A longer silence, then Hijzman spoke again: "Are there any other questions?"

Maynard started out of a reverie, "No . . . no—"

The wave broke off and a wall appeared where space had been a moment before.

Slowly, with stubborn disbelief, Franklin Maynard shook his head.

Ernest Keilin mounted the stairs with a feeling for all the past centuries. The building was old, cob-webbed with history. It once housed the Parliament of Man, and from its words went out that clanged throughout the stars.

It was a tall building. It soared—stretched—strained. Out and up to the stars, it reached; to the stars that had now turned away.

It no longer even housed the Parliament of Earth. That had now been switched to a newer, neo-classical building, one that imperfectly aped the architectural stylisms of the ancient pre-Atomic age.

Yet the older building still held its great name. Officially, it was still Stellar House, but it only housed the functionaries of a shriveled bureaucracy now.

Keilin got out at the twelfth floor, and the lift dropped quickly down behind him. The radiant sign said smoothly and quietly: Bureau of Information. He handed a letter to the receptionist. He waited. And eventually, he passed through the door which said, "L. Z. Cellioni—Secretary of Information."

Cellioni was little and dark. His hair was thick and black; his mustache thin and black. His teeth, when he smiled, were startlingly white and even—so he smiled often.

He was smiling now, as he rose and held out his hand. Keilin took it, then an offered seat, then an offered cigar.

Cellioni said: "I am very happy to see you, Mr. Keilin. It is kind of you to fly here from New York on such short notice."

Keilin curved the corners of his lips down and made a tiny gesture with one hand, deprecating the whole business.

"And now," continued Cellioni, "I presume you would like an explanation of all this."

"I wouldn't refuse one," said Keilin.

"Unfortunately, it is difficult to know exactly how to explain. As Secretary of Information, my position is difficult. I must safeguard the security and well-being of Earth and, at the same time, observe our traditional freedom of the

press. Naturally, and fortunately, we have no censorship, but just as naturally, there are times when we could almost wish we did have."

"Is this," asked Keilin, "with reference to me? About censorship, I mean?"

Cellioni did not answer directly. Instead, he smiled again, slowly, and with a remarkable absence of joviality.

He said: "You, Mr. Keilin, have one of the most widely heard and influential telecasts on the video. Therefore, you are of peculiar interest to the government."

"The time is mine," said Keilin, stubbornly. "I pay for it. I pay taxes on the income I derive from it. I adhere to all the common-law rulings on taboos. So I don't quite see of what interest I can be to the government."

"Oh, you misunderstand me. It's my fault, I suppose, for not being clearer. You have committed no crime; broken no laws. I have only admiration for your journalistic ability. What I refer to is your editorial attitude at times."

"With respect to what?"

"With respect," said Cellioni, with a sudden harshness about his thin lips, "to our policy toward the Outer Worlds."

"My editorial attitude represents what I feel and think, Mr. Secretary."

"I allow this. You have your right to your feelings and your thoughts. Yet it is injudicious to spread them about nightly to an audience of half a billion."

"Injudicious, according to you, perhaps. But legal, according to anybody."

"It is sometimes necessary to place good of country above a strict and selfish interpretation of legality."

Keilin tapped his foot twice and frowned blackly.

"Look," he said, "put this frankly. What is it you want?"

The Secretary of Information spread his hands out before him. "In a word—co-operation! Really, Mr. Keilin, we can't have you weakening the will of the people. Do you appreciate the position of Earth? Six billions, and a declining food supply! It is insupportable! And emigration is the only solution. No patriotic Earthman can fail to see the justice of our position. No reasonable human being anywhere can fail to see the justice of it."

Keilin said: "I agree with your premise that the population problem is serious, but emigration is not the only solu-

tion. In fact, emigration is the one sure way of hastening destruction."

"Really? And why do you say that?"

"Because the Outer Worlds will not permit emigration, and you can force their hand by war only. *And we cannot win a war.*"

"Tell me," said Cellioni softly, "have you ever tried emigrating. It seems to me you could qualify. You are quite tall, rather light-haired, intelligent—"

The video-man flushed. He said, curtly: "I have hay fever."

"Well," and the secretary smiled, "then you must have good reason for disapproving their arbitrary genetic and racist policies."

Keilin replied with heat: "I won't be influenced by personal motives. I would disapprove their policies, if I qualified perfectly for emigration. But my disapproval would alter nothing. Their policies *are* their policies, and they can enforce them. Moreover, their policies have some reason even if wrong. Mankind is starting again on the Outer Worlds, and they—the ones who got there first—would like to eliminate some of the flaws of the human mechanism that have become obvious with time. A hay fever sufferer is a bad egg—genetically. A cancer prone even more so. Their prejudices against skin and hair colors are, of course, senseless, but I can grant that they are interested in uniformity and homogeneity. And as for Earth, we can do much even without the help of the Outer Worlds."

"For instance, what?"

"Positronic robots and hydroponic farming should be introduced, and—most of all—birth control must be instituted. An intelligent birth control, that is, based on firm psychiatric principles intended to eliminate the psychotic trends, congenital infirmities—"

"As they do in the Outer Worlds—"

"Not at all. I have mentioned no racist principles. I talk only of mental and physical infirmities that are held in common by all ethnic and racial groups. And most of all, births must be held below deaths until a healthful equilibrium is reached."

Cellioni said, grimly: "We lack the industrial techniques

and the resources to introduce a robot-hydroponic technology in anything less than five centuries. Furthermore, the traditions of Earth, as well as current ethical beliefs forbid robot labor and false foods. Most of all, they forbid the slaughter of unborn children. Now come, Keilin, we can't have you pouring this out over video. It won't work; it distracts the attention; it weakens the will."

Keilin broke in, impatiently: "Mr. Secretary, do you want war?"

"Do I *want* war? That is an impudent question."

"Then who are the policy-makers in the government who *do* want war? For instance, who is responsible for the calculated rumor of the Pacific Project."

"The Pacific Project? And where did you hear of that?"

"My sources are secret."

"Then I'll tell you. You heard of this Pacific Project from Moreanu of Aurora on his recent trip to Earth. We know more about you than you suppose, Mr. Keilin."

"I believe that, but I do not admit that I received information from Moreanu. Why do you think I could get information from him? Is it because he was deliberately allowed to learn of this piece of trumpery."

"Trumpery?"

"Yes. I think Pacific Project is a fake. A fake meant to inspire confidence. I think that the government plans to let the so-called secret leak out in order to strengthen its war policy. It is part of a war of nerves on Earth's own people, and it will be the ruin of Earth in the end."

"And I will take this theory of mine to the people."

"You will not, Mr. Keilin," said Cellioni, quietly.

"I will."

"Mr. Keilin, your friend, Ion Moreanu is having his troubles on Aurora, perhaps for being too friendly with you. Take care that you do not have equal trouble for being too friendly with him."

"I'm not worried." The video man laughed shortly, lunged to his feet and strode to the door.

Keilin smiled very gently when he found the door blocked by two large men: "You mean I am under arrest right now."

"Exactly," said Cellioni.

"On what charge?"

"We'll think of some later."

Keilin left—under escort.

On Aurora, the mirror image of the afore-described events was taking place, and on a larger scale.

The Foreign Agents Committee of the Gathering had been meeting now for days—ever since the session of the Gathering in which Ion Moreanu and his Conservative Party made their great bid to force a vote of no confidence. That it had failed was in part due to the superior political generalship of the Independents, and in some part due to the activity of this same Foreign Agents Committee.

For months now the evidence had been accumulating, and when the vote of confidence turned out to be sizably in favor of the Independents, the Committee was able to strike in its own way.

Moreanu was subpoenaed in his own home, and placed under house arrest. Although this procedure of house arrest was not, under the circumstances, legal—a fact emphatically pointed out by Moreanu—it was nevertheless successfully accomplished.

For three days Moreanu was cross-examined thoroughly, in polite, even tones that scarcely ever veered from unemotional curiosity. The seven inquisitors of the Committee took turns in questioning, but Moreanu had respite only for ten-minute intervals during the hours in which the Committee sat.

After three days, he showed the effects. He was hoarse with demanding that he be faced with his accusers; weary with insisting that he be informed of the exact nature of the charges; throat-broken with shouting against the illegality of the procedure.

The Committee finally read statements at him—

“Is this true or not? Is this true or not?”

Moreanu could merely shake his head wearily as the structure spidered about him.

He challenged the competency of the evidence and was smoothly informed that the proceedings constituted a Committee Investigation and not a trial—

The chairman clapped his gavel finally. He was a broad man of tremendous purpose. He spoke for an hour in his final summing up of the results of the inquiry, but only a relatively short portion of it need be quoted.

He said: “If you had merely conspired with others on Aurora, we could understand you; even forgive you. Such a fault would have been held in common with many am-

bitious men in history. It is not that at all. What horrifies us and removes all pity is your eagerness to consort with the disease-ridden, ignorant and subhuman remnants of Earth.

"You, the accused, stand here under a heavy weight of evidence showing you to have conspired with the worst elements of Earth's mongrel population—"

The chairman was interrupted by an agonized cry from Moreanu, "But the motive! What motive can you possibly attribute—"

The accused was pulled back into his seat. The chairman pursed his lips and departed from the slow gravity of his prepared speech to improvise a bit.

"It is not," he said, "for this Committee to go into your motives. We have shown the facts of the case. The Committee *does* have evidence—" He paused, and looked along the line of the members to the right and the left, then continued. "I think I may say that the Committee has evidence that points to your intentions to use Earth man power to engineer a coup that would leave you dictator over Aurora. But since the evidence has not been used, I will not go further into that, except to say that such a consummation is not inconsistent with your characters displayed at these hearings."

He went back to his speech. "Those of us who sit here have heard, I think, of something termed the 'Pacific Project', which, according to rumors, represents an attempt on the part of Earth to retrieve its lost dominions.

"It is needless to emphasize here that any such attempt must be doomed to failure. And yet defeat for us is not entirely inconceivable. One thing can cause us to stumble, and that one thing is an unsuspected internal weakness. Genetics is, after all, still an imperfect science. Even with twenty generations behind us, undesirable traits may crop up at scattered points, and each represents a flaw in the steel shield of Aurora's strength.

"*That* is the Pacific Project—the use of our own criminals and traitors against us; and if they can find such in our inner councils, the Earthmen might even succeed.

"The Foreign Agents Committee exists to combat that threat. In the accused, we touch the fringes of the web. We must go on—"

The speech did, at any rate.

When it was concluded, Moreanu, pale, wild-eyed, pounded his fist, "I demand my say—"

"The accused may speak," said the chairman.

Moreanu rose and looked about him for a long moment. The room, fitted for an audience of seventy-five million by Community Wave, was unattended. There were the inquisitors, legal staff, official recorders—And with him, in the actual flesh, his guards.

He would have done better with an audience. To whom could he otherwise appeal? His glance fled hopelessly from each face it touched, but could find nothing better.

"First," he said, "I deny the legality of this meeting. My constitutional rights of privacy and individuality have been denied. I have been tried by a group without standing as a court, by individuals convinced, in advance, of my guilt. I have been denied adequate opportunity to defend myself. In fact, I have been treated throughout as an already convicted criminal requiring only sentence.

"I deny, completely and without reservation, that I have been engaged in any activity detrimental to the state or tending to subvert any of its fundamental institutions.

"I accuse, vigorously and unreservedly, this Committee of deliberately using its powers to win political battles. I am guilty not of treason, but of disagreement. I disagree with a policy dedicated to the destruction of the larger part of the human race for reasons that are trivial and inhumane.

"Rather than destruction, we owe assistance to these men who are condemned to a harsh, unhappy life solely because it was our ancestors and not theirs who happened to reach the Outer Worlds first. With our technology and resources, they can yet recreate and redevelop—"

The chairman's voice rose above the intense near-whisper of Moreanu: "You are out of order. The Committee is quite prepared to hear any remarks you make in your own defense, but a sermon on the rights of Earthmen is outside the legitimate realm of the discussion."

The hearings were formally closed. It was a great political victory for the Independents; all would agree to that. Of the members of the Committee, only Franklin Maynard was not completely satisfied. A small nagging doubt remained.

He wondered—

Should he try one last time? Should he speak once more and then no more to that queer little monkey ambassador from Earth? He made his decision quickly and acted upon it instantly. Only a pause to arrange a witness, since even for himself an unwitnessed private communion with an Earthman might be dangerous.

Luiz Moreno, Ambassador to Aurora from Earth, was, to put not too fine a point on it, a miserable figure of a man. And that wasn't exactly an accident. On the whole, the foreign diplomats of Earth tended to be dark, short, wizened, or weakly—or all four.

That was only self-protection since the Outer Worlds exerted strong attraction for any Earthman. Diplomats exposed to the allure of Aurora, for instance, could not but be exceedingly reluctant to return to Earth. Worse, and more dangerous, exposure meant a growing sympathy with the demigods of the stars and a growing alienation from the slum-dwellers of Earth.

Unless, of course, the ambassador found himself rejected. Unless, he found himself somewhat despised. And then, no more faithful servant of Earth could be imagined, no man less subject to corruption.

The Ambassador from Earth was only five foot two, with a bald head and receding forehead, a pinkish affectation of beard and red-rimmed eyes. He was suffering from a slight cold, the occasional results whereof he smothered in a handkerchief. And yet, withal, he was a man of intellect.

To Franklin Maynard, the sight and sound of the Earthman was distressing. He grew queasy at each cough and shuddered when the ambassador wiped his nose.

Maynard said: "Your excellency, we commune at my request because I wish to inform you that the Gathering has decided to ask your recall by your government."

"That is kind of you, councilor. I had an inkling of this. And for what reason?"

"The reason is not within the bounds of discussion. I believe it is the prerogative of a sovereign state to decide for itself whether a foreign representative shall be *persona grata* or not. Nor do I think you really need enlightenment on this matter."

"Very well, then." The ambassador paused to wield his handkerchief and murmur an apology. "Is that all?"

Maynard said: "Not quite. There are matters I would like to mention. Remain!"

The ambassador's reddened nostrils flared a bit, but he smiled, and said: "An honor."

"Your world, excellency," said Maynard, superciliously, "displays a certain belligerence of late that we on Aurora find most annoying and unnecessary. I trust that you will find your return to Earth at this point a convenient opportunity to use your influence against further displays such as recently occurred in New York where two Aurorans were manhandled by a mob. The payment of an indemnity may not be enough the next time."

"But that is emotional overflow, Councilor Maynard. Surely, you cannot consider youngsters shouting in the streets to be adequate representations of belligerence."

"It is backed by your government's actions in many ways. The recent arrest of Mr. Ernest Keilin, for instance."

"Which is a purely domestic affair," said the ambassador, quietly.

"But not one to demonstrate a reasonable spirit toward the Outer Worlds. Keilin was one of the few Earthmen who until recently could yet make their voices heard. He was intelligent enough to realize that no divine right protects the inferior man simply because he is inferior."

The ambassador arose: "I am not interested in Auroran theories on racial differences."

"A moment. Your government may realize that much of their plans have gone awry with the arrest of your agent, Moreanu. Stress the fact that we of Aurora are much wiser than we have been prior to this arrest. It may serve to give them pause."

"Is Moreanu *my* agent? Really, councilor, if I am dis-accredited, I shall leave. But surely the loss of diplomatic immunity does not affect my personal immunity as an honest man from charges of espionage."

"Isn't that your job?"

"Do Aurorans take it for granted that espionage and diplomacy are identical? My government will be glad to hear it. We shall take appropriate precautions."

"Then you defend Moreanu? You deny that he has been working for Earth."

"I defend only myself. As to Moreanu, I am not stupid enough to say anything."

"Why stupid?"

"Wouldn't a defense by myself be but another indictment against him? I neither accuse nor defend him. Your government's quarrel with Moreanu, like my governments with Keilin—whom you, by the way, are most suspiciously eager to defend—is an internal affair. I will leave now."

The communion broke, and almost instantly the wall faded again. Hijzman was looking thoughtfully at Maynard.

"What do you think of him?" asked Maynard, grimly.

"Disgraceful that such a travesty of humanity should walk Aurora, I think."

"I agree with you, and yet . . . and yet—"

"Well?"

"And yet I can almost find myself able to think that he is the master and that we dance to his piping. You know of Moreanu?"

"Of course."

"Well, he will be convicted; sent to an asteroid. His party will be broken. Offhand, anyone would say that such actions represent a horrible defeat for Earth."

"Is there doubt in your mind that such is the case?"

"I'm not sure. Committee Chairman Hond insisted on airing his theory that Pacific Project was the name Earth gave to a device for using internal traitors on the Outer Worlds. But I don't think so. I'm not sure the facts fit that. For instance, where did we get our evidence against Moreanu?"

"I certainly can't say."

"Our agents, in the first place. But how did they get it? The evidence was a little *too* convincing. Moreanu could have guarded himself better—"

Maynard hesitated. He seemed to be attempting a blush, and failing. "Well, to put it quickly, I think it was the Terrestrial Ambassador who somehow presented us with the most evidence. I think that he played on Moreanu's sympathy for Earth first to befriend him and then to betray him."

"Why?"

"I don't know. To insure war, perhaps—with this Pacific Project waiting for us."

"I don't believe it."

"I know. I have no proof. Nothing but suspicion. The committee wouldn't believe me either. It seemed to me, perhaps, that a last talk with the ambassador might reveal something, but his mere appearance antagonizes me, and I find I spend most of my time trying to remove him from my sight."

"Well, you are becoming emotional, my friend. It is a disgusting weakness. I hear that you have been appointed a delegate to the Interplanetary Gathering at Hesperus. I congratulate you."

"Thanks," said Maynard, absently.

Luiz Moreno, ex-Ambassador to Aurora, had been glad to return to Earth. He was away from the artificial landscapes that seemed to have no life of their own, but to exist only by virtue of the strong will of their possessors. Away from the too-beautiful men and women and from their ubiquitous, brooding robots.

He was back to the hum of life and the shuffle of feet; the brushing of shoulders and the feeling of breath in the face.

Not that he was able to enjoy these sensations entirely. The first days had been spent in lively conferences with the heads of Earth's government.

In fact, it was not till nearly a week had passed, that an hour came in which he could consider himself truly relaxed.

He was in the rarest of all appurtenances of Terrestrial Luxury—a roof garden. With him was Gustav Stein, the quite obscure physiologist, who was, nevertheless, one of the prime movers of the Plan, known to rumor as the Pacific Project.

"The confirmatory tests," said Moreno, with an almost dreadful satisfaction, "all check so far, do they not?"

"So far. *Only* so far. We have miles to go."

"Yet they will continue to go well. To one who has lived on Aurora for nearly a year as I have, there can be no doubt but that we're on the right track."

"Um-m-m. Nevertheless, I will go only by the laboratory reports."

"And quite rightly." His little body was almost stiff with gloating. "Some day, it will be different. Stein, you have not met these men, these Outer Worlders. You may have come across the tourists, perhaps, in their special hotels, or riding

through the streets in inclosed cars, equipped with the purest of private, air-conditioned atmospheres for their well-bred nostrils; observing the sights through a movable periscope and shuddering away from the touch of an Earthman.

"But you have not met them on their own world, secure in their own sickly, rotting greatness. Go, Stein, and be despised a while. Go, and find how well you can compete with their own trained lawns as something to be gently trod upon.

"And yet, when I pulled the proper cords, Ion Moreanu fell—Ion Moreanu, the only man among them with the capacity to understand the workings of another's mind. It is the crisis that we have passed now. We front a smooth path now."

Satisfaction! Satisfaction!

"As for Keilin," he said suddenly, more to himself than to Stein, "he can be turned loose, now. There's little he can say, hereafter, that can endanger anything. In fact, I have an idea. The Interplanetary Conference opens on Hesperus within the month. He can be sent to report the meeting. It will be an earnest display of our friendliness—and will keep him away for the summer. I think it can be arranged."

It was.

Of all the Outer Worlds, Hesperus was the smallest, the latest settled, the furthest from Earth. Hence the name. In a physical sense, it was not best suited to a great diplomatic gathering, since its facilities were small. For instance, the available community-wave net-work could not possibly be stretched to cover all the delegates, secretarial staff, and administrators necessary in a convocation of fifty planets. So meetings in person were arranged in buildings impressed for the purpose.

Yet there was a symbolism in the choice of meeting place that escaped practically nobody. Hesperus, of all the Worlds, was furthest removed from Earth. But the spatial distance—one hundred parsecs or more—was the least of it. The important point was that Hesperus had been colonized not by Earthmen, but by men from the Outer World of Faunus.

It was therefore of the second generation, and so it had no "Mother Earth." Earth to it was but a vague grandmother, lost in the stars.

As is usual in all such gatherings, little work is actually done on the session floors. That space is reserved for the

official soundings of whatever is primarily intended for home ears. The actual swapping and horse-trading takes place in the lobbies and at the lunch-tables and many an irresolvable conflict has softened over the soup and vanished over the nuts.

And yet particular difficulties were present in this particular case. Not in all worlds was the community-wave as paramount and all-pervading as it was on Aurora, but it was prominent in all. It was, therefore, with a certain sense of outrage and loss that the tall, dignified men found it necessary to approach one another in the flesh, without the comforting privacy of the invisible wall between, without the warm knowledge of the break switch at their fingertips.

They faced one another in uneasy semi-embarrassment and tried not to watch one another eat; tried not to shrink at the unmeant touch. Even robot service was rationed.

Ernest Keilin, the only accredited video-representative from Earth, was aware of some of these matters only in the vague way they are described here. A more precise insight he could not have. Nor could anyone brought up in a society where human beings exist only in the plural, and where a house need only be deserted to be feared.

So it was that certain of the most subtle tensions escaped him at the formal dinner party given by the Hesperian government during the third week of the conference. Other tensions, however, did not pass him by.

The gathering after the dinner naturally fell apart into little groups. Keilin joined the one that contained Franklin Maynard of Aurora. As the delegate of the largest of the Worlds, he was naturally the most newsworthy.

Maynard was speaking casually between sips at the tawny Hesperian cocktail in his hand. If his flesh crawled slightly at the closeness of the others, he masked the feeling masterfully.

"Earth," he said, "is, in essence, helpless against us if we avoid unpredictable military adventures. Economic unity is actually a necessity, if we intend to avoid such adventures. Let Earth realize to how great an extent her economy depends upon us, on the things that we alone can supply her, and there will be no more talk of living space. And if we are united, Earth would never dare attack. She will exchange her barren longings for atomic motors—or not, as she pleases."

And he turned to regard Keilin with a certain hauteur as the other found himself stung to comment:

"But your manufactured goods, councilor—I mean those you ship to Earth—they are not *given* us. They are exchanged for agricultural products."

Maynard smiled silkily. "Yes, I believe the delegate from Tethys has mentioned that fact at length. There is a delusion prevalent among some of us that only Terrestrial seeds grow properly—"

He was interrupted calmly by another, who said: "Now I am not from Tethys, but what you mention is not a delusion. I grow rye on Rhea, and I have never yet been able to duplicate Terrestrial bread. It just hasn't got the same taste." He addressed the audience in general, "In fact, I imported half a dozen Terrestrians five years back on agricultural laborer visas so they could oversee the robots. Now they can do wonders with the land, you know. Where they spit, corn grows fifteen feet high. Well, that helped a little. And using Terrestrial seed helped. But even if you grow Terrestrial grain, its seed won't hold the next year."

"Has your soil been tested by your government's agricultural department?" asked Maynard.

The Rhean grew haughty in his turn: "No better soil in the sector. And the rye is top-grade. I even sent a hundred-weight down to Earth for nutritional clearance, and it came back with full marks." He rubbed one side of his chin, thoughtfully: "It's flavor I'm talking about. Doesn't seem to have the right—"

Maynard made an effort to dismiss him: "Flavor is dispensable temporarily. They'll be coming to us on our terms, these little-menhordes of Earth, when they feel the pinch. We give up only this mysterious flavor, but they will have to give up atom-powered engines, farm machinery, and ground cars. It wouldn't be a bad idea, in fact, to attempt to get along without the Terrestrial flavors you are so concerned about. Let us appreciate the flavor of our home-grown products instead—which could stand comparison if we gave it a chance."

"That so?" the Rhean smiled. "I notice you're smoking Earthgrown tobacco."

"A habit I can break if I have to."

"Probably by giving up smoking. I wouldn't use Outer World tobacco for anything but killing mosquitoes."

He laughed a trifle too boisterously, and left the group. Maynard stared after him, a little pinch-nosed.

To Keilin, the little byplay over rye and tobacco brought a certain satisfaction. He regarded such personalities as the tiny reflection of certain Galactopolitical realities. Tethys and Rhea were the largest planets in the Galactic south, as Aurora was the largest in the Galactic north. All three planets were identically racist, identically exclusivist. Their views on Earth were similar and completely compatible. Ordinarily, one would think that there was no room to quarrel.

But Aurora was the oldest of the Outer Worlds, the most advanced, the strongest militarily—and, therefore, aspired to a sort of moral leadership of all the Worlds. That was sufficient in itself to arouse opposition, and Rhea and Ethys served as focal points for those who did not recognize Auroran leadership.

Keilin was somberly grateful for that situation. If Earth could but lean her weight properly, first in one direction, then in the other, an ultimate split, or even just a fragmentation—

He eyed Maynard cautiously, almost furtively, and wondered what effect this would have on the next day's debate. Already, the Auroran was more silent than was quite polite.

And then some under-secretary of sub-official threaded his way through the clusters of guests in finicking fashion, and beckoned to Maynard.

Keilin's following eyes watched the Auroran retreat with the newcomer, watched him listen closely, mouth a startled "What!" that was quite visible to the eye, though too far off to be heard, and then reach for a paper that the other handed him.

And as a result the next day's session of the conference went entirely differently than Keilin would have predicted.

Keilin discovered the details in the evening video-casts. The Terrestrial government, it seemed, had sent a note to all the governments attending the conference. It warned each one bluntly that any agreement among them in military or economic affairs would be considered an unfriendly act against Earth and that it would be met with appropriate countermeasures. The note denounced Aurora, Tethys, and Rhea all equally. It accused them of being engaged in an

imperialist conspiracy against Earth, and so on—and on—and on.

"Fools!" gritted Keilin, all but butting his head against the wall out of sheer chagrin. "Fools! Fools! Fools!" And his voice died away still muttering that same one word.

The next session of the conference was well and early attended by a set of angry delegates who were only too eager to grind into nothingness the disagreements still outstanding. When it ended, all matters concerning trade between Earth and the Outer World's had been placed in the hands of a commission with plenary powers.

Not even Aurora could have expected so complete and easy a victory, and Keilin, on his way back to Earth, longed for his voice to reach the video, so that it could be to others, and not to himself only, that he could shout his disgust.

Yet on Earth, some men smiled.

Once back on Earth, the voice of Keilin slowly swirled under and down—lost in the noisier clamor that shouted for action.

His popularity sank in proportion as trade restrictions grew. Slowly, the Outer Worlds drew the noose tighter. First, they instituted a strict application of a new system of export licensing. Secondly, they banned the export to Earth of all materials capable of being "used in a war effort". And finally they applied a very broad interpretation indeed of what could be considered usable in such a connection.

Imported luxuries—and imported necessities, too, for that matter—vanished or priced themselves upwards out of the reach of all but the very few.

So the people marched, and the voices shouted and the banners swung about in the sunlight, and the stones flew at the consulates—

Keilin shouted hoarsely and felt as if he were going mad.

Until, suddenly, Luiz Moreno, quite of his own accord, offered to appear on Keilin's program and submit to unrestricted questioning in his capacity as ex-Ambassador to Aurora and present Secretary without Portfolio.

To Keilin it had all the possibilities of a rebirth. He knew Moreno—no fool, he. With Moreno on his program, he was assured an audience as great as his greatest. With Moreno answering questions, certain misapprehensions might be removed, certain confusions might be straightened. The mere

fact that Moreno wished to use his—*his*—program as sounding board might well mean that already a more pliant and sensible foreign policy might have been decided upon. Perhaps Maynard was correct, and the pinch was being felt and was working as predicted.

The list of questions had, of course, been submitted to Moreno in advance, but the ex-Ambassador had indicated that he would answer all of them, and any follow-up questions that might seem necessary.

It seemed quite ideal. Too ideal, perhaps, but only a criminal fool could worry over minutiae at this point.

There was an adequate ballyhoo—and when they faced one another across the little table, the red needle that indicated the number of video sets drawing power on that channel hovered well over the two hundred million mark. And there was an average of 2.7 listeners per video set. Now the theme; the official introduction.

Keilin rubbed his cheek slowly, as he waited for the signal. Then, he began:

Q. Secretary Moreno, the question which interests all Earth at the moment, concerns the possibility of war. Suppose we start with that. Do you think there will be war?

A. If Earth is the only planet to be considered, I say: No, definitely not. In its history, Earth has had too much war, and has learned many times over how little can be gained by it.

Q. You say, "If Earth is the only planet to be considered—" Do you imply that factors outside our control will bring war?

A. I do not say "will"; but I could say "may". I cannot, of course speak for the Outer Worlds. I cannot pretend to know their motivations and intentions at this critical moment in Galactic history. They *may* choose war. I hope not. If so be that they do, however, we will defend ourselves. But in any case, *we* will never attack; *we* will not strike the first blow.

Q. Am I right in saying, then, that in your opinion there are no basic differences between Earth and the Outer Worlds, which cannot be solved by negotiation?

A. You certainly are. If the Outer Worlds were sincerely desirous of a solution, no disagreement between them and us could long exist.

Q. Does that include the question of immigration?

A. Definitely. Our own role in the matter is clear and beyond reproach. As matters stand, two hundred million human beings now occupy ninety-five percent of the available land in the universe. Six billions—that is, ninety-seven percent of all mankind—are squeezed into the other five percent. Such a situation is obviously unjust and, worse, unstable. Yet Earth, in the face of such injustice, has always been willing to treat this problem as soluble by degrees. It is still so willing. We would agree to reasonable quotas and reasonable restrictions. Yet the Outer Worlds have refused to discuss this matter. Over a space of five decades, they have rebuffed all efforts on the part of Earth to open negotiations.

Q. If such an attitude on the part of the Outer Worlds continues, do you *then* think there will be war?

A. I cannot believe that this attitude will continue. Our government will not cease hoping that the Outer Worlds will eventually reconsider their stand on the matter; that their sense of justice and right is not dead, but only sleeping.

Q. Mr. Secretary, let us pass on to another subject. Do you think that the United Worlds Commission set up by the Outer Worlds recently to control trade with Earth represents a danger to peace?

A. In the sense that its actions indicate a desire on the part of the Outer Worlds to isolate Earth, and to weaken it economically, I can say that it does.

Q. To what actions do you refer, sir?

A. To its actions in restricting interstellar trade with Earth to the point where, in credit values, the total stands now at less than ten percent of what it did three months ago.

Q. But do such restrictions really represent an economic danger to Earth? For instance, is it not true that trade with the Outer Worlds represents an almost insignificant part of total Terrestrial trade? And is it not true that the importations from the Outer Worlds reach only a tiny minority of the population at best?

A. Your questions now are representative of a profound fallacy which is very common among our isolationists. In credit values, it is true that interstellar trade represents only five percent of our total trade, but ninety-five percent of our atomic engines are imported. Eighty percent of our

thorium, sixty-five percent of our cesium, sixty percent of our molybdenum and tin are imported. The list can be extended almost indefinitely, and it is quite easy to see that the five percent is an extremely important, a vital, five percent. Furthermore, if a large manufacturer receives a shipment of atomic steel-shapers from Rhea, it does not follow that the benefit redounds only to him. Every man on Earth who uses steel implements or objects manufactured by steel implements benefits.

Q. But is it not true that the current restrictions on Earth's interstellar trade have cut our grain and cattle exports to almost nothing? And far from harming Earth, isn't this really a boon to our own hungry people?"

A. This is another serious fallacy. That Earth's good food supply is tragically inadequate is true. The government would be the last to deny it. But our food exports do not represent any serious drain upon this supply. Less than one fifth of one percent of Earth's food is exported, and in return we obtain, for instance, fertilizers and farm machinery which more than make up for that small loss by increasing agricultural efficiency. Therefore, by buying less food from us, the Outer Worlds are engaged, in effect, in cutting our already inadequate food supply.

Q. Are you ready to admit, then, Secretary Moreno, that at least part of the blame for this situation should rest with Earth itself? In other words, we come to my next question: Was it not a diplomatic blunder of the first magnitude for the government to issue its inflammatory note denouncing the intentions of the Outer Worlds before those intentions had been made clear at the Interplanetary Conference?

A. I think those intentions were quite clear at the time.

Q. I beg pardon, sir, but I was at the conference. At the time the note was issued, there was almost a stalemate among the Outer World delegates. Those of Rhea and Tethys strongly oppose economic action against Earth, and there was considerable chance that Aurora and its bloc might have been defeated. Earth's note ended that possibility instantly.

A. Well, what is your question, Mr. Keilin?

Q. In view of my statements, do you or do you not think Earth's note to have been a criminal error of diplomacy which can not be made up only by a policy of intelligent conciliation?

A. You use strong language. However, I cannot answer the question directly, since I do not agree with your major premise. I cannot believe that the delegates of the Outer Worlds could behave in the manner you describe. In the first place, it is well known that the Outer Worlds are proud of their boast that the percentage of insanity, psychoses, and even relatively minor maladjustments of personality are almost at the vanishing point in their society. It is one of their strongest arguments against Earth, that we have more psychiatrists than plumbers and yet are more pinched for want of the former. The delegates to the conference represented the best of this so-stable society. And now you would have me believe that these demigods would, in a moment of pique, have reversed their opinions and instituted a major change in the economic policy of fifty worlds. I cannot believe them capable of such childish and perverse activity, and must therefore insist that any action they took was based not upon any note from Earth, but upon motivations that go deeper.

Q. But I saw the effect upon them with my own eyes, sir. Remember, they were being scolded in what they considered to be insolent language from an inferior people. There can be no doubt, sir, that as a whole, the men of the Outer Worlds are a remarkably stable people, despite your sarcasm, but their attitude towards Earth represents a weak point in this stability.

A. Are you asking me questions, or are you defending the racist views and policies of the Outer Worlds?

Q. Well, accepting your viewpoint that Earth's note did no harm, what good could it have done? Why should it have been sent?

A. I think we were justified in presenting our side of the question before the bar of Galactic public opinion. I believe we have exhausted the subject. What is your next question, please? It is the last, isn't it?

Q. It is. It has recently been reported that the Terrestrial government will take stern measures against those dealing in smuggling operations. Is this consistent with the government's view that lowered trade relations are detrimental to Earth's welfare?

A. Our primary concern is peace, and not our own immediate welfare. The Outer Worlds have adopted certain trade restrictions. We disapprove of them, and consider them

a great injustice. Nevertheless, we shall adhere to them, so that no planet may say that we have given the slightest pretext for hostilities. For instance, I am privileged to announce here for the first time that in the past month, five ships, traveling under false Earth registry, were stopped while being engaged in the smuggling of Outer World matériel into Earth. Their goods were confiscated and their personnel imprisoned. This is an earnest of our good intentions.

Q. Outer World ships?

A. Yes. But traveling under false Earth registry, remember.

Q. And the men imprisoned are citizens of the Outer Worlds?

A. I believe so. However, they were breaking not only our laws, but those of the Outer Worlds as well, and therefore doubly forfeited their interplanetary rights. I think the interview had better close, now.

Q. But this—

It was at this point that the broadcast came to a sudden end. The conclusion of Keilin's last sentence was never heard by anyone but Moreno. It ended like this:

“—means war.”

But Luiz Moreno was no longer on the air. So as he drew on his gloves, he smiled and, with infinite meaning, shrugged his shoulders in a little gesture of indifference.

There were no witnesses to that shrug.

The Gathering at Aurora was still in session. Franklin Maynard had dropped out for the moment in utter weariness. He faced his son whom he now saw for the first time in naval uniform.

“At least *you're* sure of what will happen, aren't you?”

In the young man's response, there was no weariness at all, no apprehension; nothing but utter satisfaction. “This is it, dad!”

“Nothing bothers you, then? You don't think we've been maneuvered into this.”

“Who cares if we have? It's Earth's funeral.”

Maynard shook his head: “But you realize that we've been put in the wrong. The Outer World citizens they hold are law-breakers. Earth is within its rights.”

His son frowned: “I hope you're not going to make state-

ments like that to the Gathering, dad. I don't see that Earth is justified at all. All right, what if smuggling was going on. It was just because some Outer Worlders are willing to pay black market prices for Terrestrial food. If Earth had any sense, she could look the other way, and everyone would benefit. She makes enough noise about how she needs our trade, so why doesn't she do something about it. Anyway, I don't see that we ought to leave any good Aurorans or other Outer Worlders in the hands of those apemen. Since they won't give them up, we'll make them. Otherwise, none of us will be safe next time."

"I see that you've adopted the popular opinions, anyway."

"The opinions are my own. If they're popular opinion also, it's because they make sense. Earth *wants* a war. Well, they'll get it."

"But why do they want a war, eh? Why do they force our hands? Our entire economic policy of the past months was only intended to force a change in their attitude without war."

He was talking to himself, but his son answered with the final argument: "I don't care why they wanted war. They've *got* it now, and we're going to smash them."

Maynard returned to the Gathering, but even as the drone of debate re-filled the room, he thought, with a twinge that there would be no Terrestrial alfalfa that year. He regretted the milk. In fact, even the beef seemed, somehow, to be just a little less savory—

The vote came in the early hours of the morning. Aurora declared war. Most of the worlds of the Aurora bloc joined it by dawn.

In the history books, the war was later known as the Three Weeks' War. In the first week, Auroran forces occupied several of the trans-Plutonian asteroids, and at the beginning of the third week, the bulk of Earth's home fleet was all but completely destroyed in a battle within the orbit of Saturn by an Aurora fleet not one-quarter its size, numerically.

Declarations of war from the Outer Worlds yet neutral followed like the *pop-pop* of a string of firecrackers.

On the twenty-first day of the war, lacking two hours, Earth surrendered.

The negotiations of peace terms took place among the Outer Worlds. Earth's activities were concerned with signing only. The conditions of peace were unusual, perhaps unique, and under the force of an unprecedented humiliation, all the hordes of Earth seemed suddenly struck with a silence that came from a shamed anger too strong for words.

The terms mentioned were perhaps best commented upon by a voice on the Auroran video two days after they were made public. It can be quoted in part:

"... There is nothing in or on Earth that we of the Outer Worlds can need or want. All that was ever worthwhile on Earth left it centuries ago in the persons of our ancestors.

"They call us the children of Mother Earth, but that is not so, for we are the decendents of a Mother Earth that no longer exists, a Mother Earth that we brought with us. The Earth of today bears us at best a cousinly relation. No more.

"Do we want their resources? Why, they have none for themselves. Can we use their industry or science? They are almost dead for lack of ours. Can we use their man power? Ten of them are not worth a single robot. Do we even want the dubious glory of ruling them? There is no such glory. As our helpless and incompetent inferiors, they would be only a drag upon us. They would divert from our own use food, labor, and administrative ability.

"So they have nothing to give us, but the space they occupy in our thought. They have nothing to free us from, but themselves. They cannot benefit us in any way other than in their absence.

"It is for that reason, that the peace terms have been defined as they have been. We wish them no harm, so let them have their own solar system. Let them live there in peace. Let them mold their own destiny in their own way, and we will not disturb them there by even the least hint of our presence. But we in turn want peace. We in turn would guide our own future in our own way. So we do not want *their* presence. And with that end in view, an Outer World fleet will patrol the boundaries of their system, Outer World bases will be established on their outermost asteroids, so that we may make sure they do not intrude on our territory.

"There will be no trade, no diplomatic relationships, no travel, no communications. They are fenced off, locked out,

hermetically sealed away. Out here we have a new universe, a second creation of Man, a higher Man—

"They ask us: What will become of Earth? We answer: That is Earth's problem. Population growth can be controlled. Resources can be efficiently exploited. Economic systems can be revised. We know, for we have done so. If they cannot, let them go the way of the dinosaur, and make room.

"Let them make room, instead of forever demanding room!"

And so an impenetrable curtain swung slowly shut about the Solar System. The stars in Earth's sky became only stars again as in the long-dead days before the first ship had penetrated the barrier of light's speed.

The government that had made war and peace resigned, but there was no one really to take their place. The legislature elected Luiz Moreno—ex-Ambassador to Aurora, ex-Secretary without Portfolio—as President *pro tem*, and Earth as a whole was too numbed to agree or disagree. There was only a widespread relief that someone existed who would be willing to take the job of trying to guide the destinies of a world in prison.

Very few realized how well-planned an ending this was, or with what calculation, Moreno found himself in the president's chair.

Ernest Keilin said hopelessly from the video screen: "We are only ourselves now. For us, there is no universe and no past—only Earth, and the future."

That night he heard from Luiz Moreno once again, and before morning he left for the capital.

Moreno's presence seemed incongruent within the stiffly formal president's mansion. He was suffering from a cold again, and snuffled when he talked.

Keilin regarded him with a self-terrifying hostility; an almost singing hatred in which he could feel his fingers begin to twitch in the first gestures of choking. Perhaps he shouldn't have come— Well, what was the difference; the orders had been plain. If he had not come, he would have been brought.

The new president looked at him sharply: "You will have to alter your attitude toward me, Keilin. I know you regard me as one of the Gravediggers of Earth—isn't that the phrase you used last night?—but you must listen to me quietly for a while. In your present state of suppressed rage, I doubt if you could hear me."

"I will hear whatever you have to say, Mr. President."

"Well—the external amenities, at least. That's hopeful. Or do you think a video-tracer is attached to the room?"

Keilin merely lifted his eyebrows.

Moreno said: "It isn't. We are quite alone. We *must* be alone, otherwise how could I tell you safely that it is being arranged for you to be elected president under a constitution now being devised. Eh, what's the matter?"

Then he grinned at the look of bloodless amazement in Keilin's face. "Oh, you don't believe it. Well, it's past your stopping. And before an hour is up, you'll understand."

"I'm to be president?" Keilin struggled with a strange, hoarse voice. Then, more firmly: "You are mad."

"No. Not I. Those out there, rather. Out there in the Outer Worlds." There was a sudden vicious intensity in Moreno's eyes, and face, and voice, so that you forgot he was a little monkey of a man with a perpetual cold. You didn't notice the wrinkled sloping forehead. You forgot the baldish head and ill-fitting clothes. There was only the bright and luminous look in his eyes, and the hard incision in his voice. *That* you noticed.

Keilin reached blindly backward for a chair, as Moreno came closer and spoke with increasing intensity.

"Yes," said Moreno. "Those out among the Stars. The godlike ones. The stately supermen. The strong, handsome master-race. *They* are mad. But only we on Earth know it.

"Come, you have heard of the Pacific Project. I know you have. You denounced it to Cellioni once, and called it a fake. But it isn't a fake. And almost none of it is a secret. In fact, the only secret about it was that almost none of it was a secret.

"You're no fool, Keilin. You just never stopped to work it all out. And yet you were on the track. You had the feel of it. What was it you said that time you were interviewing me on the program? Something about the attitude of the Outer Worldling toward the Earthman being the only flaw

in the former's stability. That was it, wasn't it? Or something like that? Very well, then; good! You had the first third of the Pacific Project in your mind at the time, and it was no secret after all, was it?

"Ask yourself, Keilin—what was the attitude of the typical Auroran to a typical Earthman? A feeling of superiority? That's the first thought, I suppose. But, tell me, Keilin, if he really felt superior, *really* superior, would it be so necessary for him to call such continuous attention to it. What kind of superiority is it that must be continuously bolstered by the constant repetition of phrases such as 'apemen,' 'sub-men,' 'half-animals of Earth,' and so on? That is not the calm internal assurance of superiority. Do you waste epithets on earthworms? No, there is something else there.

"Or let us approach it from another tack. Why do Outer World tourists stay in special hotels, travel in inclosed ground-cars, and have rigid, if unwritten, rules against social intermingling? Are they afraid of pollution? Strange then that they are not afraid to eat our food and drink our wine and smoke our tobacco.

"You see, Keilin, there are no psychiatrists on the Outer Worlds. The supermen are, so they say, too well adjusted. But here on Earth, as the proverb goes, there are more psychiatrists than plumbers, and they get lots of practice. So it is we, and not they, who know the truth about this Outer World superiority-complex; who know it to be simply a wild reaction against an overwhelming feeling of *guilt*.

"Don't you think that can be so? You shake your head as though you disagree. You don't see that a handful of men who clutch a Galaxy while billions starve for lack of room *must* feel a subconscious guilt no matter what? And, since they won't share the loot, don't you see that the only way they can justify themselves is to try to convince themselves that Earthmen, after all, are inferior, that they do not deserve the Galaxy, that a new race of men have been created out there and that we here are only the diseased remnants of an old race that should die out like the dinosaur, through the working of inexorable natural laws.

"Ah, if they could only convince themselves of that, they would no longer be guilty, but merely superior. Only it doesn't work; it never does. It requires constant bolstering; constant repetition, constant reinforcement. And still it doesn't quite convince.

"Best of all, if only they could pretend that Earth and its population do not exist at all. When you visit Earth, therefore, avoid Earthmen; or they might make you uncomfortable by not looking inferior enough. Sometimes they might look miserable instead, and nothing more. Or worse still, they might even seem intelligent—as I did, for instance, on Aurora.

"Occasionally, an Outer Worlder like Moreanu did crop up, and was able to recognize guilt for what it was without being afraid to say so out loud. He spoke of the duty the Outer Worlds owed Earth—and so he was dangerous to us. For if the others listened to him and had offered token assistance to Earth, their guilt might have been assuaged in their own minds; and that without any lasting help to Earth. So Moreanu was removed through our web-weaving, and the way left clear to those who were unbending, who refused to admit guilt, and whose reaction could therefore be predicted and manipulated.

"Send them an arrogant note, for instance, and they automatically strike back with a useless embargo that merely gives us the ideal pretext for war. Then lose a war quickly, and you are sealed off by the annoyed supermen. No communication, no contact. You no longer exist to annoy them. Isn't that simple? Didn't it work out nicely?"

Keilin finally found his voice, because Moreno gave him time by stopping. He said: "You mean that all this was planned? You *did* deliberately instigate the war for the purpose of sealing Earth off from the Galaxy? You sent out the men of the Home Fleet to sure death because you wanted defeat? Why, you're a monster, a . . . a—"

Moreno frowned: "Please relax. It was not as simple as you think, and I am not a monster. Do you think the war could simply be—instigated? It had to be nurtured gently in just the right way and to just the right conclusion. If we had made the first move; if we had been the aggressor; if we had in any way put the fault on our side—why they of the Outer Worlds would have occupied Earth, and ground it under. They would no longer feel guilty, you see, if *we* committed a crime against *them*. Or, again, if we fought a protracted war, or one in which we inflicted damage, they could succeed in shifting the blame.

"But we didn't. We merely imprisoned Auroran smugglers,

and were obviously within our rights. They had to go to war over it because only so could they protect their superiority which in turn protected them against the horrors of guilt. And we lost quickly. Scarcely an Auroran died. The guilt grew deeper and resulted in exactly the peace treaty our psychiatrists had predicted.

"And as for sending men out to die, that is a commonplace in every war—and a necessity. It was necessary to fight a battle, and, naturally, there were casualties."

"But why?" interrupted Keilin, wildly. "Why? *Why?* Why does all this gibberish seem to make sense to you? What have we gained? What can we possibly gain out of the present situation?"

"Gained, man? You ask what we've gained? Why, we've gained the universe. What has held us back so far? *You* know what Earth has needed these last centuries. You yourself once outlined it forcefully to Cellioni. We need a positronic robot society and an atomic power technology. We need chemical farming and we need population control. Well, what's prevented that, eh? Only the customs of centuries which said robots were evil since they deprived human beings of jobs, that population control was merely the murder of unborn children, and so on. And worse, there was always the safety valve of emigration either actual or hoped-for.

"But now we cannot emigrate. We're *stuck* here. Worse than that, we have been humiliatingly defeated by a handful of men out in the stars, and we've had a humiliating treaty of peace forced upon us. What Earthman wouldn't subconsciously burn for revenge, and what human motivation is stronger than the desire for revenge. Self-preservation has frequently knuckled under to that tremendous yearning to 'get even'.

"And that is the second third of the Pacific Project, the recognition of the revenge motive. As simple as that.

"And how can we know that this is really so? Why, it has been demonstrated in history scores of times. Defeat a nation, but don't crush it entirely, and in a generation or two or three it will be stronger than it was before. Why? Because in the interval, sacrifices will have been made for revenge that would not have been made for mere conquest.

"Think! Rome beat Carthage rather easily the first time,

but was almost defeated the second. Every time Napoleon defeated the European coalition, he laid the groundwork for another just a little bit harder to defeat, until he himself was crushed by the eighth. It took four years to defeat Wilhelm of medieval Germany, and six much more dangerous years to stop his successor, Hitler.

"There you are! Until now, Earth needed to change its way of life only for greater comfort and happiness. A minor item like that could always wait. But now it must change for revenge and that will not wait. And I want that change for its own sake.

"Only—I am not the man to lead. I am tarred with the failure of yesteryear, and will remain so until, long after I am bone-dust, Earth learns the truth. But you . . . *you*, and others like you, have always fought for the road to modernization. *You* will be in charge. It may take a hundred years. Grandchildren of men unborn may be the first to see its completion. But at least you will see the start.

"Eh, what do you say?"

Keilin was fumbling at the dream. He seemed to see it in a misty distance—a new and reborn Earth. But the change in attitude was too extreme. It could not be done just yet. He shook his head.

He said: "What makes you think the Outer Worlds would allow such a change, supposing what you say to be true. They will be watching, I am sure, and they will detect a growing danger and put a stop to it. Can you deny that?"

Moreno threw his head back and laughed noiselessly. He gasped out: "But we have still a third left on the Pacific Project, a last, subtle and ironic third—

"The Outer Worlders call the men of Earth the subhuman dregs of a great race, but *we* are the men of *Earth*. Do you realize what that means? We live on a planet upon which for a billion years, life—the life that has culminated in Mankind—has been adapting itself. There is not a microscopic part of Man, not a tiny working of his mind, that has not as its reason some tiny facet of the physical make-up of Earth, or of the biological make-up of Earth's other life-forms, or of the sociological make-up of the society about him.

"No other planet can substitute for Earth, *in Man's present shape*.

"The Outer Worlders exist as they do, only because pieces of Earth have been transplanted. Soil has been brought out there; plants; animals; men. They keep themselves surrounded by an artificial Earth-born geology which has within it, for instance, those traces of cobalt, zinc, and copper which human chemistry must have. They surround themselves by Earth-born bacteria and algae which have the ability to make those inorganic traces available in just the right way and in just the right quantity.

"And they maintain that situation by continued imports—luxury imports, they call it—from Earth.

"But on the Outer Worlds, even with Terrestrial soil laid down to bedrock, they cannot keep rain from falling and rivers from flowing, so that there is an inevitable, if slow, admixture with the native soil; an inevitable contamination of Terrestrial soil bacteria with the native bacteria, and an exposure, in any case, to a different atmosphere and to solar radiations of different types. Terrestrial bacteria disappear or change. And then plant life changes. And then animal life.

"No great change, mind you. Plant life would not become poisonous or nonnutritious in a day, or year, or decade. But already, the men of the Outer Worlds can detect the loss or change of the trace compounds that are responsible for that infinitely elusive thing we call 'flavor.' It has gone that far.

"And it will go further. Do you know, for instance, that on Aurora, nearly one half the native bacterial species known have protoplasm based on a fluorocarbon rather than hydrocarbon chemistry. Can you imagine the essential foreignness of such an environment?

"Well, for two decades now, the bacteriologists and physiologists of Earth have studied various forms of Outer World life—the only portion of the Pacific Project that has been truly secret—and the transplanted Terrestrial life is already beginning to show certain changes on the subcellular level. *Even among the humans.*

"And here is the irony. The Outer Worlders, by their rigid racism and unbending genetic policies are consistently eliminating from among themselves any children that show signs of adapting themselves to their respective planets in any way that departs from the norm. They are maintaining—they *must* maintain as a result of their own thought-

processes—an artificial criterion of 'healthy' humanity, which is based on Terrestrial chemistry and not their own.

"But now that Earth has been cut off from them; now that not even a trickle of Terrestrial soil and life will reach them, change will be piled on change. Sickesses will come, mortality will increase, child abnormalities will become more frequent—"

"And then?" asked Keilin, suddenly caught up.

"And then? Well, they are physical scientists—leaving such inferior sciences as biology to us. And they cannot abandon their sensation of superiority and their arbitrary standard of human perfection. They will never detect the change till it is too late to fight it. Not all mutations are clearly visible, and there will be an increasing revolt against the mores of those stiff Outer World societies. There will be a century of increasing physical and social turmoil which will prevent any interference on their part with us.

"We will have a century of rebuilding and revitalization, and at the end of it, we shall face an outer Galaxy which will either be dying or changed. In the first case, we will build a second Terrestrial Empire, more wisely and with greater knowledge than we did the first; one based on a strong and modernized Earth.

"In the second case, we will face perhaps ten, twenty, or even all fifty Outer Worlds, each with a slightly different variety of Man. Fifty humanoid species, no longer united against us, each increasingly adapted to its own planet, each with a sufficient tendency toward atavism to love Earth, to regard it as the great and original Mother.

"And racism will be dead, for variety will then be the great fact of Humanity, and no uniformity. Each type of Man will have a world of its own, for which no other world could quite substitute, and on which no other type could live quite as well. And other worlds can be settled to breed still newer varieties, until out of the grand intellectual mixture, Mother Earth will finally have given birth not to merely a Terrestrial, but to a *Galactic Empire*."

Keilin said, fascinated: "You foresee all this so certainly."

"Nothing is *truly* certain; but the best minds on Earth agree on this. There may be unforeseen stumbling blocks on the way, but to remove those will be the adventure of our great-grandchildren. Of *our* adventure, one phase has been

successfully concluded; and another phase is beginning. Join us, Keilin."

Slowly, Keilin began to think that perhaps Moreno was not a monster after all—

But for a century, the historians of Earth called the Three Weeks' War a defeat.

DOUBLE MEANING

Damon Knight

I

SOMEWHERE in the city, a monster was hiding. . . .

Lying back against the limousine's cushions, Thorne Spangler let his mind dwell on that thought, absorbing it with the deliberate enjoyment of a small boy sucking a piece of candy. He visualized the monster, walking down a lighted street, or sitting in a cheap hired room; tentacles coiled, waiting, under the shell that made it look like a man—or a woman. And all around it, the life of the city going on: *Hello, Jeff. Have you heard? They're stopping all the cars. Some sort of spy case . . . My sister tried to fly out to Tucson, and they turned her back . . . My cousin at the space-port says nothing is coming in or leaving except military ships. It must be something big. . . .*

And the monster, listening, feeling the net tighten around it.

The tension was growing, Spangler thought; it hung in the air, in the abnormally empty streets. You could hear it: a stillness that welled up under the beehive hum—a waiting stillness, that made you want to stop and hold your breath.

Spangler glanced at Pembun, sitting quietly beside him. Does he feel it? he wondered. It was hard to tell. You never knew what, if anything, a colonial was thinking. Probably, Spangler decided, he's most heartily wishing himself back on his own sleepy little planet, far from all this commotion at the hub of the Universe.

For Spangler himself, this moment was the climax of a lifetime. The monster—the Rithian—was only the catalyst, the stone flung into the pool. The salient fact was that just now, for as long as the operation lasted, all the interminable workings of the Earth Empire revolved around one tiny sphere: Earth Security Department, North American District, Southwestern Sector. For this brief time, one man—Spangler—was more important than all the others who administered the Empire.

It was not bad; not at all bad—for a man whose father had been a common draughtsman.

The car decelerated smoothly and stopped. Two tall men in the pearl-grey knee-breeches of the city patrol barred the way, both with automatic weapons at the ready. Behind them, the squat bulk of a Gun Unit covered half the roadway.

Two more patrolmen came forward and flung open all four doors of the car, stepping back smartly into crossfire positions. "All out," said the one with the sergeant's cape. "Security check. Move!"

As Spangler passed him, the sergeant touched his chest respectfully. "Good afternoon, Commissioner."

"Sergeant," said Spangler, in tranquil acknowledgment, smiling but not troubling himself to look at the man directly; and he led Pembun to the end of the queue.

As the line moved on, Spangler turned and found Pembun craning his short neck curiously. "It's a stereoptic fluoroscope," Spangler explained with languid amusement. "That's one test the Rithian can't meet, no matter how good his human disguise may be. One of these check stations is set up at each corner of every twentieth avenue and every tenth cross-street. If the Rithian is fool enough to pass one, we have him. If he doesn't, the house checks will force him out. He doesn't have a chance."

Spangler stepped between the screen and the bulbous twin projectors, and saw the glowing, three-dimensional image of his skeleton appear in the hooded screen. The square blotch at the left wrist and the smaller one near it were his communication and thumbwatch. The other, odd-shaped ones lower down were metal objects in his belt pouch—key projectors, calculator, memospools and the like.

The technician perched above the projector said, "Turn around. All right. Next."

Spangler waited at the limousine door until Pembun joined him. The little man's wide, flat-nosed face expressed surprise, interest, and something else that Spangler could not quite define.

"Ow did you ever get 'old of so many portable fluoroscopes in such a 'urry?" he asked.

Spangler smiled delightedly. "It's no miracle, Mr. Pembun, just adequate preparation. Those 'scopes have been stored and maintained, for exactly this emergency, since twenty-one eighteen."

"Four 'undred years," said Pembun wonderingly. "My! And this is the first time you've 'ad to use them?"

"The first time." Spangler waved Pembun into the car. Following him, he continued, "But it took just under half an hour to set up the complete network. Not only the fluoroscopes were ready, but complete, detailed plans of the entire operation. All I had to do was to take them out of the files."

The car moved past the barrier.

"My!" said Pembun again. "I feel kind of like an extra nose." His eyes gleamed faintly in the half-dark as Spangler turned to look at him.

"I ask your pardon?"

"I mean," said Pembun, "it doesn't seem to me as if you rilly need me very much."

That expressionless drawl, Spangler thought, could become irritating in time. The man had been educated on Earth; why couldn't he speak properly?

"I'm sure your advice will prove invaluable, Mr. Pembun," he said smoothly. "After all, we have no one here who's actually had . . . friendly contact with the Rithians."

"That's right," said Pembun, "I almost forgot. We're so used to the Rithi, ourselves, it's kind of 'ard to remember that Earth never did any trading with them." He pronounced "Rithi" with a curious whistling fricative, something between *th* and *s*, and an abrupt terminal vowel. It was not done for swank, Spangler thought; it simply came more naturally to the man than the standardized "Rithians". Probably Pembun spoke the Rithian tongue at least as well as he spoke Standard English.

Spangler half-heartedly tried to imagine himself a part of Pembun's world. A piebald rabble, spawned by half a dozen sub-standard groups that had left Earth five centuries before.

Haitians, French West Africans, Jamaicans, Puerto Ricans. Low-browed, dull-eyed loafers, breeders, drinkers and brawlers, mouthing an unbelievable tongue degraded from already corrupt English, French and Spanish. *Colonials*—in fact, if not in name.

"We couldn't do any trading with the Rithians, Mr. Pembun," he said at last, coolly. "They are not human."

"Yes, I recollect now, Commissioner," the little man replied humbly. "It jus' slipped my mind for a minute. Shoo, I was taught about that in school. Earth's 'ad the same policy toward non-yuman cultures for the last four 'undred years. If they 'aven't got to the spaceship stage yet, put them under surveillance and make sure they don't. If they 'ave, and they're weak enough, a quick preventive war. If they're too strong, like the Rithi—delaying tactics, subversion, sabotage, divide-and-rule. *Then* war." He chuckled. "It makes my 'ead ache jus' thinking about it."

"That policy," Spangler informed him, "has withstood the only meaningful test. Earth survives."

"Yes, sir," said Pembun vacuously. "She certainly does."

The things, Spangler thought half in mockery, half in real annoyance, that I do for the Empire!

A touch of his forefinger at the base of the square, jeweled thumbwatch produced a soft chime and then a female voice: "Fourteen-ten and one quarter."

Spangler hesitated. It was an awkward time to call Joanna; the afternoon break, in her section, came at fourteen-thirty. But if he waited until then he would be back at the Hill himself, tied up in a conference that might not end until near quitting time. It was irritating to have to speak to her in Pembun's presence, too, but there was no help for it now. He had been too busy to call earlier in the afternoon—Pembun's arrival had upset his schedule—and his superior, Keith-Ingram, had chosen to call him while he was on his way to the spaceport, occupying the whole journey with fruitless discussion.

He could have called her at any other time during the past three days, of course; he had not done so. That had been deliberate; this Rithian affair was only a convenient pretext. It was good strategy. But Spangler knew his antagonist, knew the limits of her curiosity and pride almost to the hour. Any longer delay would be dangerous.

Spangler reached for the studs of the limousine's com-

municator, set into the front wall of the compartment. His wristphone would have been easier and more private, but he wanted to see her face.

"You'll excuse me?" he said perfunctorily.

"Of cawse." The little men turned toward the window on his side of the car, presenting his back to Spangler and the communicator screen.

Spangler punched the number. After a moment the screen lighted and Joanna's face came into view.

"Oh—Thorpe."

Her tone was poised, cool, almost expressionless—which was to say, normal. She looked at him, out of the screen's upholstered frame, with the expression that almost never altered: direct, gravely intent, receptive. Her skin and eyes were so clear, her emotional responses so deliberate and pallid, that she seemed utterly, almost abstractly normal: a type personified, a symbol, a mathematical fiction. Everything about her was refined and subdued: her gestures, movements, her rare laughter. Her face itself might have been modeled to fit the average man's notion of "aristocracy."

That, of course, was why Spangler had to have her.

In this one respect, she was precisely what she looked—the Planters were one of the oldest, most powerful, and most unassailably patrician families in the Empire. Without such an alliance, Spangler knew painfully well, he had gone as far as he could, and a good deal farther than a less determined man would have hoped. With her, he would only have begun—and his children would receive, by right of birth, all that he had fought to gain.

In nearly all other ways, Joanna was a mirror of deceptions. She seemed cool and self-possessed, but was neither; she was only afraid. It was fear that delayed and censored every word she spoke, every motion: fear of betraying herself, fear of demanding too much, fear of giving too much.

He let the silence lengthen until, in another second, it would have been obvious that he was hesitating for effect. Then he said politely, "I'm not disturbing you?"

"... No, of course not." The pause before she answered had been a trifle longer than normal.

She's hurt, Spangler thought with satisfaction.

"I would have called earlier, if I could," he said soberly. "This is the first free moment I've had in three days."

It was a lie, and she knew it; but it was so plausible that she could accept it, if she chose, without loss of dignity. That was the knife-edge on which Spangler had hung his fortunes. Deliberately, knowing the risk, he had drawn their relationship so thin that a touch would break it.

Had there been any other course he could have taken? Despite himself, Spangler's anxiety led him through each stage of the logic again, seeking a flaw.

Cancel the approach direct. He had asked her to marry him, for the first time, a week after they had become lovers. She had refused without hesitation and without coyness; she meant it.

Cancel the approach dialectical. Joanna had a keen and capable mind, but she could be as stubborn as any dullard. There is no argument that can wear down a woman's "I don't want to."

Cancel the approach violent: tentatively. Four days ago, at the end of a long weekend they had spent together in the Carpathians, he had tried brutality—not on impulse, but with calculated design which had achieved its primary object: he had reduced her to tears.

After that, apology and reconciliation. After that, silence: three days of it. Silence wounds more than a blow, and wounds more deeply.

Joanna had spent her whole life in retreating from things that had injured her.

But Spangler had three things on his side: Joanna's affection and need for him; ordinary human perversity, which desires a thing, however often refused, the instant it is withdrawn; and the breaking of the rhythm. Rhythm, however desirable in some aspects of the relations between sexes, is fatal in most others. Request, argument, violence . . . if he had begun the cycle again, as both of them subconsciously expected, he would simply have made his own defeat more certain.

As it was, he had weakened her resistance by making her gather it against a thrust that never came. . . .

Joanna said, "I understand. You do look tired, Thorne. You're all right, though, aren't you?"

Spangler said abruptly, "Joanna, I want to see you. Soon. Tonight. Will you meet me?"

Before, his tone had been almost as casual as hers, and he had watched the minuscule changes in her expression that

meant she was softening toward him. Now he spoke urgently, and saw her stiffen again.

Never let her rest, he thought. Never let her get her balance. . . . He spoke softly again: "It will be the last time, if you decide it that way. But let me see you tonight."

"... All right."

"Shall I send a car for you?"

She nodded, and then her image dissolved. Spangler leaned back, with a sigh, into the cushions.

"My," said Pembun, "look at awl the tawl buildings!"

II

THEY WERE STOPPED twice more before they reached Administration Hill, and went through a routine search at the entrance. From there, the trip to Security Section took less than a minute. The limousine let them out at Spangler's office door and returned automatically to the motor pool three levels below.

Contrasted with the group that was waiting at the conference table, under the hard, clear glow-lights, Pembun looked like a shabby mongrel that had somehow crawled into a thoroughbred kennel. His skin was yellowish under the brown; his jowls were wider than his naked cranium; his enormous ears stuck straight out from his head. His tunic and pantaloons were correctly cut, but he looked hopelessly awkward in them.

After all, Spangler reminded himself carefully, the man could not help being what he was.

"Gentlemen," he said, "allow me to present Mr. Jawj Pembun of Manhaven. Mr. Pembun was a member of the colonial government before his planet gained its independence, and since that time has been of service to the Empire in various capacities. He brings us expert knowledge of the Rithians. Lieutenant Colonel Cassina, who is our liaison with the Space Navy—his new aide, Captain Wei—Dr. Baustian of the Bureau of Alien Physiology—Mr. Pemberton of the Mayor's staff—Miss Timoney and Mr. Gordon, of this office."

Pembun shook hands with all of them without any notice-

able sign of awe. To the Mayor's spokesman he said affably, "You know, Pemberton was origin'ly my family's name. They just gradually shortened it to Pembun. That's a coincidence, isn't it?"

Pemberton, a fine-boned young man with pale eyes and hair, stiffened visibly.

"I hardly think there is any relation," he said.

Spangler picked up a memo spool that lay before him and tapped it sharply against the table. "At the suggestion of the Foreign Relations Department," he said delicately, "Mr. Pembun was brought in from Ganymede especially for this emergency. I arranged for his passage through the cordon and met him personally at the spaceport." In short, gentlemen, he thought, this yokel has been wished on us by the powers that be, and we shall have to put up with him as best we can.

"Now," he said. "I imagine Mr. Pembun would like to be brought up to date before we proceed." There was a snort from Colonel Cassina which Spangler pointedly ignored. He began the story, covering the main points quickly and concisely. Pembun, his face grim, stopped him only once to ask a question.

"Are you sure that's all the Rithi there were to begin with—just seven?"

"No, Mr. Pembun," Spangler admitted. "We don't yet know how or by whom they were smuggled through to Earth, therefore we must consider the possibility that others are still undetected. To deal with that possibility, Security is patrolling the entire planet, using a random-based spot check system. But we know that these seven were here, and that one of them is still at large. When we find him, we hope to get all the information we need. The idea of suicide is repugnant to these Rithians, I understand."

"That's right," said Pembun soberly. "I guess you can take him alive, all right. Prob'ly could 'ave taken all seven after the accident, if your patrolmen 'adn' shot so quick."

"Those were city patrolmen," said Pemberton acidly, with a flush on his cheekbones, "not Security men. Their conduct was perfectly in order. When they arrived on the scene of the accident, and saw three men attempting to aid four others whose bodies were torn open, exposing the alien shapes underneath, they instantly fired on the whole group. Those

were their orders; that was what they had been trained to do in any such event. They would have been right, even if one of the Rithians had not escaped into the crowd."

Smiling, Pembun shook his head. "I'm not so good at paradoxes," he said. "They jus' mix me up."

"There is no paradox, Mr. Pembun," said Spangler gently. "A fully equipped Security crew can take chances with an unknown force which a municipal patrol cannot. A patrolman, discovering an alien on this planet, must kill first and investigate afterwards—because an alien spy or saboteur, by definition, has unknown potentialities. Planning centuries in advance, as we must, we obviously can't foresee every possible variant of a basic situation; but we can and do lay down directives which will serve our best interests in the vast majority of cases. And we can't, Mr. Pembun, we can *not* allow crucial decisions to be made on the spot by non-executive personnel."

Colonel Cassina cleared his throat impatiently. "Shall we get on?"

"Just one moment. Mr. Pembun, I want to make this point clear to you if I can. *Interpretation is the dry rot of law.* One interpretation, and the law is modified; two, the law is distorted—three hundred million, and there is no law at all, there is pure anarchy. In a small system, of course—a single planet, for example—there are only a few intermediate stages between planning and execution. But when you consider that we're dealing here with an empire of two hundred sixty planets, an aggregate of more than *eight hundred billion* people, you'll realize that directives must be rigid and policy unified.

"In an emergency, the lower-echelon official who acts according to his own personal interpretation may be right or wrong. The similar official who follows a rigid policy, prepared to meet the widest possible variety of actual situations, *will* be right—in nine hundred ninety-nine out of a thousand cases. We take the long view; we can't afford to do otherwise."

Pembun nodded seriously. He said, "We 'ad the same trouble at 'ome—on a smaller scale, of course. Right after we declared our independence, we formed a federation with the two other planets in our system, Novaya Zemlya and Reunion. It seemed like a good idea—you know, for mutual de-

fense and so on. But we found out that to keep that big a gover'ment running we 'ad to stiffen it up something dreadful, an' some'ow or other it didn' seem to be as cheap to run as three diff'rent gover'ments, either. So we split up ag'in."

Spangler maintained his urbane expression with difficulty. Colonel Cassina's neck was brick red, and Dr. Baustian, Captain Wei and Miss Timoney were staring at Pembun in frank amazement. The others merely looked embarrassed.

Really, it was a waste of time to take any pains with a barbarian like this. Try to explain the philosophy behind the workings of the greatest empire of all time, and all Pembun got out of it was a childish analogy to the history of his own pipsqueak solar system!

He regarded the little man through narrowed lids. Come to think of it, was Pembun really as simple as he appeared, or was he snickering to himself behind that stolid yellow-brown face?

He had said several things which could only be explained by the worst of bad taste or the sheerest blind ignorance. After Spangler's reference to Manhaven's "gaining its independence" surely a polite way of putting it, since Manhaven had seceded from the Empire only on Earth's sufferance, at a time when she was occupied elsewhere—Pembun had said, "After we *declared* our independence—"

Carelessness, or deliberate, subtly pointed insult?

Was Pembun saying. "There are two hundred sixty planets and eight hundred billion people in your Empire, all right—but there used to be a lot more, and a century from now there'll be a lot less?"

Insufferable little planet-crawler. . . .

Colonel Cassina said, "Mr. Pembun, do I understand you to suggest that we too should *split up* as you put it? That the Empire should be *liquidated*?"

"Why, no, Colonel," said Pembun. "That wouldn't be any business of mine, you know. That would be up to the people that still live in the Empire to decide."

Cassina snorted and sputtered. Pemberton's face was white with indignation. It was remarkable, Spangler thought with one corner of his mind, how readily Pembun could rub them all the wrong way. If it could possibly be arranged, future meetings had better be held without him.

"Gentlemen," he said, raising his voice a trifle. "Shall we continue our conference?"

After they had left, Spangler sat alone in his inner office, toying absently with the buttons that controlled the big information screen opposite his desk. He switched on one multi-colored, three-dimensional organization chart after another, without seeing any of them.

Pembun had behaved himself, in a manner of speaking, after that clash with Cassina. But the things he had said had become not merely irritating, but—disquieting.

It had begun with the usual complaint from Pemberton, speaking for the mayor. Like most every planetary and local government department except Security, the city administration wanted to know when the Rithian would be captured and the planet-wide blockade ended.

Spangler had assured him that the Rithian could not possibly remain concealed for more than a week at the utmost.

And then Pembun had remarked, "Excuse me, Commissioner, but I b'lieve it would be safer if you said two months."

"Why, Mr. Pembun?"

"Well, because Rithi got to 'ave a lot of beryllium salts in their food. The way I see it, this one Rithch wouldn' 'ave more than six or eight weeks' supply with 'im. After that, you can either tie up all the supplies of beryllium salts, so 'e 'as to surrender or starve, or jus' watch the chemical supply 'ouses an' arrest anybody 'oo buys them. Either way, you got 'im. Might take a little more than two months. Say two and a 'alf or three."

"Mr. Pembun," Spangler said with icy patience, "that's an admirable plan, but we're not going to need it. The house checks will get our Rithian before a week is up."

"Clear ever'body out of a building, an' wawk them all past one of those fluoroscopes?"

"That's it," Spangler told him. "One area at a time, working inward from the outskirts of the city to the center."

"Uh-mm," said Pembun. "Only thing is, the Rithi got no bones."

Spangler raised his brows and glanced at Dr. Baustian. "Is that correct, doctor?"

"Well, yes, so I understand," said the physiologist tolerantly, "but I assume that would be indication enough—if the fluoroscope showed a very small cartilage and no bones at all?"

Laughter rippled around the table.

"Not," said Pembun, "if 'e swallowed a skel'ton."

Cassina said something rude in an explosive voice. Spangler, incredulous amusement bubbling up inside him, stared at Pembun. "*Swallowed a skeleton?*"

"Uh-mm. You people wouldn't know about it, I guess, because you 'aven' done any trading with the Rithi—scientific trading least of awl—but the Rithi got—" He hesitated. 'Our name for it is *mudabs boyó*; I guess in Standard that would be 'protean insides.' "

"Protean!" from Dr. Baustian.

"Yes, sir. Their outside shape is fixed, almos' as much as ours, or they wouldn't need any disguises to look like a man; but the insides is pretty near all protean flesh—make it into a stomach, or a bowel, or a bladder, or w'atever they 'appen to need. They could swallow a yuman skel'ton, all right—it wouldn' inconvenience them at awl. An' they could imitate the rest of a man's insides well enough to fool you. They could make it move natural, too. That means they wouldn't need any braces or anything, jus' a plastic shell for a disguise.

"I 'ate to say it, but I don't believe those fluoroscopes are going to do much good."

In a moment, the table had been in an uproar again.

Spangler grunted, switched on his speakwrite and began to dictate a report of the conference. "To Claude Keith-Ingram, Chief Comm Dept-Secur," he said. "Most Secret. Most Urgent." He thought for a moment, then rapidly gave an account of Pembun's statement, adding that Dr. Baustian doubted the validity of his information, and that Pembun admitted he had never seen any actual evidence of the Rithians' alleged protean ability.

He read it over, then detached the spool and tossed it into the out tube.

He was still unsatisfied.

He had done everything he could be expected to do, exactly according to regulations. If policy were to be changed, it was not for him to change it. Logic and instinct both assured him that Pembun was not to be taken seriously.

But there was something else Pembun had said that still bothered him, for a reason he could not explain. He had not included it in his report; it would have seemed—to put it mildly—frivolous.

Pembun had said:

"There's one more thing you got to watch out for—those Rithi got a 'ell of a sense of yumor."

It was fifteen-twenty; there would be time before he met Joanna.

Spangler passed his hand over the intercom. "Gordon," he said.

"Yes, sir?"

"Did you find quarters for Mr. Pembun?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where is he?"

"G level, section seven, suite one eleven."

"Right," said Spangler, flicking his hand over the intercom to break the connection. He stood up, walked out of the office, and buzzed a scooter.

"G level," he said into its mechanical ear.

III

THE DOOR of suit 111 was ajar. Inside, a baritone voice was singing to the accompaniment of some stringed instrument. Spangler paused and listened.

Odum Páwkee mónt a mut-ting

Vágis câsh odum Paw-kée

Odum Páwkee mónt a mut-ting

Tóuda por tásh o cáw-fée!

There was a final chord, then a hollow wooden thump and jangle as the instrument was set down; then the clink of ice cubes in a glass.

Spangler put his hand over the doorplate. The chime was followed by Pembun's voice calling, "Come awn in!"

Pembun was comfortably slumped in a recliner, with his collar undone and his feet high. The glass in his hand, judging by color, contained straight whiskey. On a low table at his side were the remains of a man-sized meal, a decanter, an ice bucket and several clean glasses, and the instrument—a tiny, round-bellied thing with three strings.

The little man swung himself lithely around and rose. "I was 'oping somebody would cawl," he said happily. "Gets

kind of lonesome in this place—lonesomer than the mountings a thousand miles from anybody, some'ow. 'Ere, take the company seat, Commissioner. A glawss of w'iskey?"

Spangler took an upright chair. "This will do nicely," he said. "No thanks to the whiskey—I haven't your stomach."

Pembun looked startled, then smiled. "I'll get them to sen' up some soda," he said. He swung himself into the recliner again, reached for the intercom and gave the order.

"W'y I looked surprised for a minute w'en you said that," he explained, turning sidewise on the recliner," "is because we got an expression on Man'aven. W'en we say, 'I 'aven' got your stomach,' that means I don' like you, we're not sympathetic. '*E no ay to stomá.*'"

Spangler felt an unexpected twinge of guilt—of course Pembun knew he wasn't liked—and then a wave of irritation. Damn the man! How did he always manage to put one in the wrong?

He kept his voice casual and friendly. "What was that you were singing, just before I came in?"

"Oh, that—'Odum Pawkee Mont a Mutting.'" He picked up the instrument and sang the chorus Spangler had heard. Spangler listened, charmed in spite of himself. The melody was simple and jaunty—the kind of thing, he told himself, that would go well sung on muleback . . . or the backs of whatever ill-formed beasts the Manhavenites used instead of mules.

Pembun put the instrument down. "In English, that means, 'Old Man Pawkey climbs a mounting, clouds 'ide Old Man Pawkey. Old Man Pawkey climbs a mounting, all for a cup of coffee!'"

"Is there more?"

Pembun made his eyes comically wide. "Oh, shoo! There's 'bout a trillion verses. I only know every tenth one, about, but we'd be 'ere all night if I sang 'em. It's kind af a saga. Old Man Pawkey was a settler who lived up in the Desperation Mountings in the early days. That's in the temperate zone, but even so it's awful wild country, all straight up and straight down. 'E loved coffee, you know, but of course there wasn' any. Well, 'e 'eard there was some in the spaceport town, Granpeer, down in the plateau country, and 'e went there, on foot. Twenty-two 'undred kilometers. Or so they say."

The conveyor door popped open, Pembun went over to

get the soda and pour Spangler a drink. "There were some big things done in those days," he added, "but there were some big lies told, too."

Spangler felt an obscure shock that left him jumpy again. In the conscious effort to sympathize with Pembun, to understand the man in his own terms, he had managed to build up a picture which was really not too hard to admire: the wild, colorful, free life of the frontier, the hardships accepted and conquered, the deeds of heroism casually done, et cetera, et cetera. It was the sort of life Spangler himself had dreamed of in his early youth, before he had realized that it was a hopeless anachronism; that the only career for an ambitious man was not adventure, not discovery, but control.

And then Pembun himself, in half a sentence, had indifferently rejected that picture. "There were some big lies told, too."

Pembun didn't believe in the Empire; all right. But—if he had no respect for his own planet's traditions, then what in the name of sanity *did* he believe in?

Spangler was a man who tried hard to be liberal. But now, staring at Pembun's round brown face, the yellowish whites of his eyes, he thought once more: It's a waste of time to try to understand this man. He's not civilized; he thinks like an animal. There's simply *no point of contact*.

He said abruptly, "At the meeting, you mentioned something about the Rithian's 'sense of humor.' What, exactly, did you mean?"

He was thinking: In a few minutes I'll be back in my office. I'll drink half of this highball, precisely, and then I'll go.

Pembun leaned back in the relaxer, head turned slightly, eyes alert on Spangler. "Well," he said, "They're a real 'ighly-advanced people, technologically—you know that. But the things that strike them funny remind you more of the kind of backwoods planet, like Man'aven. Maybe that's w'y we got along so well with them—Man'aven yumor is kind of primitive. Pulling out a chair w'en a man goes to sit down. That kind of thing. But they beat us.

"They'll go forty kilos out of their way to play a joke, even w'en it isn' good business. I've 'eard a novel written by one of their big authors—twelve spools, mus' be more than five 'undred thousan' words long—jus' so 'e could build up to

a dirty joke at the end. It was a bes'seller in their solar system. An' they're crazy about puns—plays on words. Some of their sentences you're suppose' to read as many as fifteen, twenty different ways."

Spangler's memory groped uneasily for a moment and then produced a relevant fact. "Like Joyce," he said. "The twentieth-century decadent."

"Uh-mm," Pembun agreed. "I use' to be able to quote pages of *Finnegans Wake*. 'riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodious vicus of recirculation. . . .' That's primer talk, compared to Rithi literature."

Spangler swallowed deliberately and set his glass down on the wide arm of his chair. He felt the vast, cool, good-humored patience of a man who knows how to retreat from his own petty emotions. "I don't want to seem obtuse," he said, "but has this got anything to do with my problem?"

Pembun's brows creased delicately. He looked anxious, searching for words. "Nothing, *specifically*," he said earnestly. "W'at I mean is jus' that in general, you got to watch out for that sense of yumor. I mean, you already know that this Rithi is going to 'urt you bad if 'e can. But you got to remember also that if 'e can, 'e's going to do it some way that'll be side-splittingly funny to 'im. It isn' easy to figure out w'ich way a Rithch is going to jump, but you can do it sometimes if you know w'at makes them lahf."

Spangler swallowed again, leaving exactly half the drink behind, and stood up. He was a trifle impatient with himself for having come here at all, but at least he had the satisfaction of knowing that a lead had been explored and canceled out: than an x had been completely corrected to a zero.

"Thank you, Mr. Pembun," he said that the doorway; "for the drink and the information. Good evening."

"You got to look out for that 'ypnotism, too," said Pembun as an after-thought.

Spangler stood in the doorway, strangling. Pembun looked at him with a politely inquiring expression.

"Hypnotism!" Spangler said, and started back into the room. "What hypnotism?"

"My goodness," cried Pembun, "didn' you know about *that*?"

IV

THEY LAY together in companionable silence, in a darkened room, facing the huge unscreened window—window in the archaic sense, a simple hole in the wall—through which a feather-light touch of cool, salt air came unhindered. On either side, where the shore thrust out an arm, Spangler could see a cluster of multicolored lights—Angels proper on the right, St. Monica on the left. Straight ahead was nothing but silver sea and ghost-grey cloud, except when the tiny spark of an airship crossed silently and was gone.

The universe was a huge, half-felt presence that flowed through the open window to contain them; as if, Spangler thought, they were two grains of dust sunk in an ocean that stretched to infinity.

It was soothing, in a way, but there was a touch of unpleasantness in it. Spangler shifted his body restlessly, feeling the breeze fumble at his bare skin. The scale was too big, he thought; he was too used to the rabbit-warren of the Hill, perhaps, to be entirely easy outside it. Perhaps he needed a change. . . .

"That wind is getting a little chilly," he said. "Let's close the window and turn on the lights."

"I thought it was nice," she said. "But go ahead, if you like."

Now I've insulted her window, Spangler thought wryly. Nevertheless, he reached forward and found the stud that rolled a sheet of vitrin down over the opening.

It was a period piece, the window—Twenty First Century, even to the antique servo mechanism that operated it. So was everything else in Joanna's tower; the absurd four-legged chairs, the massive tables, the carpets, even the huge pneumatic couch. There were paper books in the shelves, and not the usual decorator's choices, either, but books that a well-read twenty-first-century citizen might actually have owned—Shakespeare and Sterne, Jones and Joyce, Homer and Hemingway all jumbled in together. If the fashion would

let her, Spangler thought, I believe she would wear skirts.

A glow of rose-tinted light sprang up, and he turned to see Joanna with one slender arm around her knees, her head bent solemnly over the lighted cigarette she had just taken from the dispenser. She handed him another.

Spangler pulled himself up beside her and leaned against the back of the couch. The smoke of their cigarettes fanned out, pink in the half-light, and faded slowly into floating haze.

The room's curved walls and ceiling enclosed them snugly, safely. . . .

The Twenty First Century, the Century of Peace, was a womb, Spangler thought. The image was not his, but Joanna's; she had picked it up in some book or other. "A womb with a view." That was it. A childishly fanciful description, as one would expect of that period, but accurate enough. Self-deception was not one of Joanna's vices—unfortunately.

To win her finally and completely, it would be necessary to break down the clear image she had of herself—cast her adrift in chaos, so that she would turn blindly to him for her lost security. It was not going to be easy.

Joanna said, without moving, "Thorne, I'd like to talk seriously to you, just for a minute."

"Of course."

"You know what I'm going to say, probably; but just to have things clear—do you want us to go on together?"

Matching her tone, Spangler said, "Yes."

". . . I do too. You know I'm fonder of you than I've ever been of anyone. But I won't ever marry you. You've got to believe that, and accept it, or it's no good . . . I'm trying to be fair."

"You're succeeding," Spangler told her lightly. He turned and put his hand on her knee. "Just to be equally clear—I've been insufferable to you, and I was a maniac last weekend, and I'm sorry. Shall we both forget it?"

She smiled: "Yes. We will."

Her lips moved and altered as he leaned toward her: corners turning downward, pink moist flesh swelling up into the blind shape of desire. His free arm sank into the softness of her back, abruptly hard as her body tautened. Eyes closed, he heard the sibilant whisper of her legs slowly straightening against the counterpane. . . .

Afterward, he lay wrapped in a warm lethargy that was like floating in quiet water. It was an effort to force himself out of that mindless content, but it was necessary. As he was vulnerable at this moment, so was she. When she spoke to him lazily, he answered her with increasing constraint, until he felt his tension flow into her.

Then he rolled over abruptly, got up and stood at the window. Staring out at the vast, obscene emptiness of sky and sea. Now it was easier. As he had often, in his childhood, worked himself deliberately into white-hot anger—when, if he had not forced himself to be angry, he would have been afraid—now, with equal deliberateness, he opened his mind to despair.

Suppose that I failed, and lost Joanna, he thought. But that was not enough. What would be the most dreadful thing that could possibly happen? The answer came of itself: Pembun, and his Rithians with their boneless bodies and their hypnotism. Shapeless faces staring in from a sea of darkness. *Suppose they won.* Suppose the Empire went down under that insensate wave, and all the walls everywhere crumbled to let smothering Chaos in?

Her voice: "Thorne? Is anything the matter?"

He pulled himself back, shuddering, from the cold emptiness that his mind had fastened upon. For an instant it had been real, it had happened, it was *there*. He had been lost and alone, fumbling in an endless night.

When he turned, he knew that his agony showed plainly in his face. He did his best to restrain and suppress it: that would show too.

"Nothing," he said. He walked around the couch, reached past her for a cigarette, then moved to the closet.

"You're going?" she asked uncertainly.

"I've got to be in early tomorrow," he said. "And I've been running a little short of sleep."

"... All right."

Fastening his cloak, he went to her and took her hand. "Don't mind me, will you? I'm a little jumpy—it's been an unpleasant week. I'll call you tomorrow."

Her lips smiled, but her eyes were wide and unfocused. Caution was in them, and a hint of something else—pleasure, perhaps, touched with guilt?

He rode home with a feeling of satisfaction that deepened

into a fierce joy. If she learned that she could hurt him, learned to expect it, learned to like it, then in time she could endure the thought of being hurt in return. It was only necessary to go slowly, advancing and retreating, shifting his ground, stripping her defenses gradually; until at last, whether for guilt or pleasure or love, she would marry him.

For love and pleasure, fear and hatred, honor and ambition were all doors that could be opened or shut.

Pain was the key. . . .

Early the following morning, alone in his inner office, Spangler sat composedly and looked into his desk vision screen, from which the broad, grey face of Claude Keith-Ingram stared back at him.

"You asked Pembun why he hadn't divulged this information earlier?" Keith-Ingram demanded sharply.

"I did," Spangler said. "He answered that he had assumed we already knew of it, since the Empire was known to possess the finest body of knowledge in the field of security psychology in the inhabited Galaxy."

"Hmm," said Spangler's superior, frowning. "*Sarcasm*, do you think?"

Spangler hesitated. "I should like to be able to answer that with a definite no, but I can't be sure. Pembun is not an easy man to fathom."

"So I understand," said Keith-Ingram. "However, he has an absolutely impeccable record in the Outworld service. I don't think there can be any question of actual disloyalty."

Spangler was silent.

"Well, then," said Keith-Ingram testily, "what about this alleged pseudohypnotic ability of the Rithians? What does it amount to?"

"According to Pembun, complete control under very favorable conditions. He says, however, that the process is rather slow and limited in extent. In other words, that a Rithian might be able to take control of one or two persons if it could get them alone and unsuspecting, but that it would be unable to control a large group at any time or even a small group in an emergency."

Keith-Ingram nodded. "Now, about this other matter of the protean faculty—" he glanced down at something on his own desk, outside the range of the scanner—"none of the

available agents who have served in the Rithian system have anything even suggestive to report in that regard."

Spangler nodded. "That could mean anything or nothing."

"Yes," said the grey man. "On the whole, I'm inclined to feel as you evidently do, that there's nothing in it. Pembun may be competent and so on, but he's not Earth and he's not Security. Still, I don't have to remind you that if he's right on all counts, we've got a *very* serious situation on our hands."

Spangler smiled grimly and nodded again. Keith-Ingram was noted for his barbed understatements. *If* Pembun was right, then it followed that the Empire's agents in the Rithian system had carried back no more information than the Rithians wanted them to have. . . .

Keith-Ingram rubbed his chin with a square, well-manicured hand. "Now, to date the normal procedures haven't produced any result."

"That's correct," Spangler admitted. Using all available personnel, it would take another four days to complete the house checks. Before that time, negative results would prove nothing.

"And according to Pembun, those procedures are no good. Now, has he proposed any alternate method, other than that beryllium-salts scheme of his?"

"No, sir. He held out no hope of results from that one under two and a half months."

"Well, he may have something more useful to suggest. Ask him. If he does—try it."

"Right," said Spangler.

"Good," said the grey man, giving Spangler his second-best smile. "Keep in touch, Thorne—and if anything else odd turns up, don't hesitate to call me direct."

The screen cleared.

Spangler stared at the vacant screen for a few moments, pursing his lips thoughtfully, then leaned back, absently fingered the banks of control studs at the edge of his desk. After a moment, he found himself mentally reviewing the film, taken in the Rithian system, which had been used in briefing Security personnel for the spy search.

First you saw only a riotous, bewildering display of green and gold; the shapes were so unfamiliar that the mind took several seconds to adjust. Then you perceived that the green was a swaying curtain of broad-leafed vines; the splashes of

gold were intricate, many-petaled blossoms. Behind, barely noticeable, was a spidery framework of metal, and beyond that, an occasional glimpse of mist-blue that suggested open space.

Then the Rithian moved into view.

At first you thought "Spiders!", and Spangler remembered that he had jumped; spiders were a particular horror of his. Then, when the thing stopped in front of the camera, you saw that it was no more like a spider than like an octopus or a monkey.

Curiously, its outline most resembled those of the great golden blossoms. There was a circlet of tentacles, lying in gentle S-curves, and below that another. The thing's body was a soft sac that dangled beneath the lower set of tentacles; there was a head, consisting almost entirely of two huge, dull-red eyes. The creature's body was covered with short, soft-looking ochre fur or spines.

To some people, Spangler supposed, it would be beautiful: the sort of people who professed to find beauty in the striped, oval bodies of big beetles.

The thing turned quickly, hung still for another moment, and then clambered in a blur of limbs up the vine again.

Then there was another scene: darker green, this time—the gloom of a forest rather than a garden city. A Rithian moved into view, clinging to the slick purplish bole of a tree. Three of its foretentacles held a long, slender object that was obviously a weapon. It hung motionless for some minutes; then the gun moved slightly and a brilliant thread of violet flame lanced out from it. Far in the background something reddish shrieked and plummeted through the branches.

That was all, but that little was impressive enough. The weapon the film showed, evidently the equivalent of a light sporting rifle, compared favorably in performance with a Mark LV Becket.

There were other films; Spangler had not seen them, but he could imagine the kind of thing they must be. Pictures of Rithian factories, Rithian spaceships, Rithian laboratories. No matter what they were like in detail, in mass they had been impressive enough to convince Earth's strategists that making war on the Rithians might be disastrous.

So the slow campaign had begun: economic sabotage, subversion, propaganda. Nothing overt; nothing that could be

surely traced to the Earthmen masquerading as Non-Empire traders in the Rithian system. The tiny disruption bombs that had destroyed many another, weaker world would not be planted: the Rithians were a space-faring people, with colonies and a space fleet, and such a people can retaliate if their home world is destroyed. The campaign would be simply one of slow, patient attrition, designed to weaken the Rithians as a race and as a galactic nation; to divide them politically, hamper them economically and intellectually; to enmesh them in so subtle a net of difficulties that eventually, without knowing how it had come about, the Rithians would find that the crest of the wave had passed them by; that they were settling into the trough of history. It would take centuries, but Earth could wait.

Well, the Rithians *had* discovered their enemies. And now the situation was grotesquely changed. No part of Earth's knowledge of the Rithians could any longer be considered reliable. The Rithians might be stronger or weaker than had been thought; the one thing that appeared certain was that they were not as they appeared in the films and the written reports that had reached Earth.

Even the best planning could not always succeed, Spangler thought. It was conceivable that Earth had finally met an antagonist against whom neither force nor subtlety would be of any use. Wonderingly, Spangler allowed his mind to focus on the idea of a universe in which the human race had been exterminated, like so many other races which had met superior force, superior subtlety. It was like trying to imagine the universe going forward after one's own death; his mind pulled back from it instinctively, shaken and alarmed.

At any rate, the game was not yet played out; and, Spangler reminded himself wryly, he was not charged with the responsibility of revising the Empire's military policy. He had one simple task to perform:

Find the Rithian.

Which brought him inevitably back to Pembun. Spangler's irritation returned, and grew. With a muttered "*Damn the man!*" he stood and began pacing restlessly up and down his office.

Spangler was a career executive, not a Security operative; but he knew himself to be conscientious, thorough, interested in his work—and he had been in the Department for fifteen

years. He ought not to feel about anyone as he felt about Pembun: baffled, uneasy, his mind filled with shadowy suspicions that had no source and no direction.

He had been through Pembun's dossier not once but three times: Keith-Ingram was right, the man's record was absolutely clean. But—Spangler stopped pacing. There was one thing which the dossier did not explain, and it was the first thing an agent of Security should want to know about any man.

"What does he *want*?" Spangler asked aloud.

That was it: it located the sore spot that had been bothering Spangler for two days. What was Pembun after, what did he hope to accomplish? His talk was subtly flavored with amused contempt for the Empire and admiration for the Rithians. Then why was he working for one to defeat the other?

That was the thing to find out.

V

THE flow chart of Administration Hill was enormously complex. Processions of speedsters, coptercars and limousines merged, mingled and separated again; scooters, for intramural transport, moved in erratic lines among the larger vehicles and darted along the interoffice channels reserved for them alone. Traffic circles and cloverleaves directed and disturbed the flow. At every instant vehicles slipped out of the mainstream, discharged or loaded passengers, and were gone again.

The cars, individually, were silent. In the aggregate, they produced a sound that just crossed the threshold of audibility: a single sustained note which blended itself with the hum of a million conversations, the shuffling of a million feet. The resulting sound was that of an enormous, idling dynamo.

Pembun's movements traced a thin, wavering line across all this ordered confusion. And wherever he passed, amusement spread in his wake.

At the intersection of Corridors Baker and One Zero, he tried to dismount from a scooter before it had come to a complete stop. The scooter's safety field caught him, half on

and half off, and held him, his limbs waving like an angry beetle's, until it was safe to put him down.

A ripple of laughter spread, and some of the recordists and codex operators, with nothing better to do in their morning break, following him into the Section D commissary.

His experience with the scooter seemed to have dazed the little man. He boarded the moving strip inside the commissary and then simply stood there, watching the room swing past him. He made a complete circuit, passing a dozen empty tables, and began another. The recordists and codex girls nudged their friends and pointed him out.

On the third circuit, Pembun appeared to realize that he would eventually have to get off. He put out a foot gingerly, then drew it back. He faced in the other direction, decided that was worse, and turned around again. Finally, with desperate resolution, he stepped off the slowly-moving strip. His feet somehow got tangled. Pembun sat down with a thud that shook the floor.

The laughter spread again. A man at a strip-side table got something caught in his windpipe and had to have his back pounded. Diners at more distant locations stood up to see what was happening. Half a dozen people, trying to hide their smiles, helped Pembun to his feet.

Pembun wandered out again. A blue-capped official guide came forward, determinedly helpful, but Pembun, with vehement gestures, explained that he was all right and knew where he was going.

His bones ached, from his coccyx all the way up to his cranium. That had been his sixth pratt-fall of the morning, and there were others still to come.

He felt more than a little foolish—this place was so *big!* but he plowed through the press at the commissary entrance, signaled for another scooter and rode it half a kilometer down the corridor.

On the walkway, just emerging from one of the offices, was a group which included two people he knew: the darkly mustachioed Colonel Cassina and his expressionless aide, Captain Wei. Pembun waved happily and once more tried to get off the scooter before it had stopped.

He writhed frantically in the tingling, unpleasant grip of the safety field. When it set him down at last, he charged forward, slipped, lost his balance, and—

The jar traveled all the way up his spine and exploded against the back of his head. He looked up, dazedly.

The group wore a collective expression of joyful disbelief. There were suppressed gurglings, as of faulty plumbing; a nervous giggle or two from the feminine contingent; snickers from the rear. Colonel Cassina allowed himself a single snort of what passed with him for laughter. Even the impassive Captain Wei emitted a peculiar, high-pitched series of sounds which might be suggested by "*Tcheel tcheel tcheel*!"

Helpful hands picked Pembun up and dusted him off. Cassina, his face stern again, said gruffly, "Don't get off before the thing stops, man. That way you won't get hurt." He turned away, then came back, evidently feeling the point needed more stress. "*Don't get off before the thing stops. Understand?*"

Pembun nodded, wordless. Mouth half open, he watched Cassina and Wei as they boarded a tandem scooter and swung off up Corridor Baker.

When he turned around, a disheveled Gordon was looming over him. "There you are!" cried the young man. "Really, Mr. Pembun, I've been looking for you upwards of an hour. Didn't you hear your annunciator buzzing?"

Pembun glanced at the instrument strapped to his right wrist. The movable cover was turned all the way to the left. "My!" he said. "I never thought about it, Mr. Gordon. Looks like I 'ad it turned off all the time."

Gordon smiled with his lips. "Well, I've found you, anyhow, sir. Can you come along to the Commissioner's office now? He's waiting to see you."

Without waiting for an answer, Gordon simultaneously hailed a tandem scooter and spoke into the instrument at his wrist.

"That's fine," said Pembun happily. "That was w'ere I 'ad a mind to go, any'ow."

He boarded the scooter in front of Gordon, and this time followed Cassina's advice. He waited until the scooter had come to a complete stop, got off without difficulty, and strolled cheerfully into Spangler's office.

"Sorry I was 'ard to find," he said apologetically. "I 'ad my mind on w'at I was doing, and I didn' notice I 'ad my communicator turned off."

"Perfectly all right, Mr. Pembun," said Spangler, with iron

patience. "Sit down. That's all, Gordon, thanks." He turned to Pembun. "Your suggestions are being followed up," he said curtly. "My immediate superior has directed me to ask you if you can help us still further by suggesting some new line of attack—one, for preference, which won't require two or three months."

"I was working on that," Pembun told him, "and not getting much of anyw'ere. But it doesn't matter now. I got another idea, and I was lucky. I found your Rithch."

As Spangler's face slowly froze, Pembun added, "'E's Colonel Cassina's aide, Captain Wei."

Spangler began in a strangled voice, "Are you seriously saying—" He stopped, pressed a stud on the edge of his desk, and began again. "This conversation is being recorded, Mr. Pembun. You have just said that you have found the Rithian, and that he is Captain Wei. Tell me your reasons."

"Well, I better start at the begining," said Pembun, "otherwise it won't make sense. You see, I 'ad a notion this Rithch might be a little worried. The flurosopes wouldn' bother 'im, of cawse, but the planet-wide embargo would. And so far as 'e knew, you might bring up something that would work better than flurosopes. So I thought it jus' might be possible that 'e'd 'ide 'imself in the middle of the people that were looking for 'im. That way, 'e'd be able to dodge your search squads, and 'e might stand a chance of getting 'imself out through the cordon. That was w'y 'e picked Colonel Cassina, seemingly. Any'ow, I thought it would strike 'im funny."

"So I went around making people lahf, jus' taking a chance. It was kind of 'ard, becawse like I told you, the Rithi got a primitive sense of yumor. Now, if you go and fall on your be'ind in front of a Rithch, 'e's going to lahf. 'E can't 'elp 'imself. That's wat Captain Wei did. Ive 'eard the Ritchi lahf before. It sounds enough like yuman lahfter to fool you if you're not paying attention, but once you've 'eard it you'll never be mistaken. I'm telling you the truth, Commissioner. Captain Wei is the Rithch."

Spangler, his lips thin, put his hand over the communicator plate. "Dossier on Captain Wei," he said.

"If you'll excuse me, Commissioner, I don' know w'ether 'e knows 'e gave 'imself away or not. If 'e knows we're after 'im and we don' catch 'im pretty quick, 'e's liable to do something we won't like."

Spangler glanced at Pembun, his face sharp with irritation, and started to speak. Then his desk communicator buzzed and he put his hand over it. "Yes?"

Gordon's worried voice said, "There is no dossier on Captain Wei, Commissioner. I don't understand how it could have happened. Do you want me to check with District Archives in Denver?"

After a moment Spangler shot another glance at Pembun, a look compounded of excitement, intense dislike and unwilling respect. He said, "Do it later, Gordon. Meanwhile, get me Colonel Cassina, and then call the guardroom. I want all the available counter-Rithian trainees with full equipment, and I want them *now*."

There was no doubt about it: "Captain Wei" was the Rithian spy. Somewhere, somehow, it must have managed to meet Cassina and make friends with him; or, at any rate, contrived to remain in his company long enough to take over control of Cassina's mind—to convince him, probably, that "Wei" was an old and valued friend, with whom Cassina had worked elsewhere; that "Wei" was now free to accept a new assignment, and that Cassina had already arranged for his transfer.

Introduced by Cassina, the supposed Chinese officer had passed without question. But there was no dossier in the files bearing that name. "Captain Wei" did not exist.

All this time, Spangler thought with a shudder, that monster had been living in their midst, sitting at their conferences, hearing everything that was planned against it. It must have been hard for it not to laugh.

The bitterest thing of all was that Pembun had found it. If it ever got out that a moon-faced colonial had solved Spangler's problem for him by falling on his rear all over Administration Hill. . . .

Spangler impatiently put the thought out of his mind. They were at the doorway to Cassina's private office. "Wei" was in the smaller office immediately beyond; it communicated both with Cassina's suite and with the outer offices.

He saw the squad leader raise his watch to his ear. By now the other half of the detail would have reached the outer offices and quietly evacuated them. It must be time to go in.

The squad leader opened the door, and Spangler stepped in past him. Pembun was immediately behind; then came the

five operatives, all armed with immobilizing field projectors, and Mark XX "choppers"—energy weapons which, in the hands of a skilled operator, would slice off an arm or leg—or tentacle—as neatly as a surgeon could do it.

The operatives were encased from head to foot in tight, seamless gasproofs. The upper halves of their faces were covered by transparent extensions of the helmets; the rest of the face-coverings, with the flexible tubes that led to oxygen tanks on their backs, dangled open on their chests.

This, at any rate, was according to standard operating procedure. The Rithian was urgently wanted alive, but no chances could or would be taken. "Wei's" room would be shut off by two planar force screens, one projected by the standard equipment in Cassina's desk, the other by a portable projector set up by the squad in the outer offices. At the same instant, the air-conditioning ducts serving the room would be blocked off. Inside that airtight compartment, the operatives would simultaneously gas and immobilize the Rithian; and if anything went wrong, they would use the choppers. It was a maneuver that had been rehearsed a hundred times.

Spangler had told Cassina nothing—had only asked if Wei were in his office, then had hesitated as if changing his mind and promised to call back in a few minutes. Now Cassina stood up behind his desk, eyes bulging. "What's this? What's this?" he said incredulously.

"Wei," Spangler said. "Stand out of the way, please, Colonel. I'll explain in a moment."

"Explain!" said Cassina sharply. "See here, Spangler—"

The squad leader moved forward to the closed door of the inner office. At his signal, three of the remaining men took positions in front of the door; the other moved to herd Cassina out from behind his desk.

Cassina stepped aside, then moved suddenly and violently. Spangler, frozen with shock, saw him stiff-arm the approaching operative and instantly hurl himself into the group at the door. The group dissolved into a maelstrom of motion; then the door was open, Cassina had disappeared, and the others were untangling themselves and streaming in after him.

Spangler found himself running forward. A wisp of something acrid caught his throat; muffled shouts rang in his ears. A man's green-clad back blocked his view for an instant, then he darted to one side and could see.

The Rithian, his back oddly humped, was half-crouched over the dangling, limp body of Colonel Cassina. The monster's hands were clenched around Cassina's throat.

Everything was very clear, highly magnified.

A voice Spangler knew suddenly filled the room. Evidently the loudspeaker system had been turned on, though why they had got Joanna to declaim, "*The quality of mercy is not strained; it droppeth as the gentle rain. . . .*" Spangler really could not say.

It was very strange.

Everything had suddenly gone dead still, and the room was tilting very slowly to a vertiginous angle, while the tensed body of the Rithian—or was it really Captain Wei?—collapsed with equal slowness over the body of his victim. Spangler tried languidly to adjust himself to the tilting of the room, but he seemed to be paralyzed. There was no sensation in any part of his body. Then the floor got bigger and bigger, and at last turned into a dazzling mottled display that he watched for a long time before it greyed and turned dark.

"What happened?"

That was just the question Spangler wanted answered; he wished they had let him ask it himself. He tried to say something, but another voice cut in ahead of him.

"He went into the room without a suit. The gas got him."

Whom were they talking about? Slowly it dawned on Spangler that it was himself. That was it; that was why everything had been so strange a moment ago—

He opened his eyes. He was lying on the couch in his own private office. Two medical technicians, in pale-green smocks, were standing near the head of the couch. Farther down were Gordon, Miss Timoney and the squad leader. Pembun was sitting in a chair against the wall.

One of the medics languidly picked up Spangler's wrist and held it for a few seconds, then gently thumbed back one eyelid. "He's all right," he said, turning in Gordon's direction. "No danger at all." He moved away, and the other medic followed him out of the room.

Spangler sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the couch, and drew several deep breaths. He still felt a little dazed, but his head was clearing. He said to the leader, "Tell me what happened."

The leader had removed his gasproof and was standing, bare-headed, in orange tights and high-topped shoes. He had

an olive face, with heavy black brows and a stiff brush of greying black hair. He said, "You got a whiff of the gas, Commissioner."

"I know that, man," Spangler said irritably. "Tell me the rest."

"Colonel Cassina attacked us and forced his way into the inner office," the leader said. "We were taken by surprise, but we fired the gas jets and then got inside as fast as we could. When we got inside, we found the Rithian apparently trying to throttle Colonel Cassina. My men and I used the choppers, but, not to excuse ourselves, Commissioner, the Colonel interfered with our aim. The Rithian was killed."

Spangler felt an abrupt wave of nausea, and mastered it with an effort. "Colonel Cassina? How is he?"

"In bad shape, I understand, Commissioner."

"He's in surgery now, sir." Gordon put in. "He's alive, but his throat is crushed."

Spangler stood up a little shakily. "What's been done with the Rithian?"

"I've had the body taken down to the lab, sir," Gordon said. "Dr. Baustian is there now. But they're waiting for your orders before they go ahead."

"All right," said Spangler, "let's get on with it."

He caught a glimpse of Pembun, with a curious expression on his face, trailing along behind the group as they left.

VI

AT FIRST the corpse looked like the body of a young Chinese murdered by a meticulously careful axe-fiend: there was a gaping wound straight down from forehead to navel, then a perpendicular cross-cut, and then another gash down each leg.

Then they peeled the human mask away, and underneath lay the Rithian. The worst of it, Spangler thought, was the ochre fur: it was soft-looking, and a darker color where it was rumpled—like the fur of the teddy bear he remembered from his childhood. But this was an obscene teddy bear, a thing of limp tentacles and dull bulging red eyes, with a

squashy bladder in the middle. It ought to have been stepped on, Spangler thought, and put into the garbage tube and forgotten.

It filled the human shell exactly. The top ring of tentacles had been divided, three on each side, to fit into "Wei's" arms. In the middle of each clump of tentacles, when the lab men pried them apart, was the white skeleton of a human arm; the shoulder joint emerged just under the ring. The tentacles in the second ring had been coiled neatly around the body, out of the way. The rest of the torso, and the leg spaces, had been filled by a monstrous, muscular bulging of the Rithian's sac-like abdomen.

Then the dissection started . . .

Spangler stayed only because he could not think of a suitable excuse to leave; Cassina was still in shock and could not be seen.

Baustian and the other bio men were like children with new toys: first the muscles, and the nerve and blood and lymph systems in the "legs" the Rithian had formed from its shapeless body; then, when they cut open the torso, one bloody lump after another held up, and prodded, and exclaimed over. "Good Lord, look at this pancreas!" or "this liver!" or "that kidney!"

In the end, the resemblance to a teddy bear was nothing at all. The most horrible thing was that the more they cut, the more human the body looked. . . .

Later, he was standing in front of Cassina's door, and Pembun was holding his arm. "Don' tell 'im the Rithi is dead," the little man said urgently. "Tell 'im it was all a mistake. Let 'im think w'at 'e likes of you. It may be important."

"Why?" Spangler asked vacantly.

Pembun looked at him with that same odd, haunted expression Spangler had noticed before, when they had left his office. He ought to be feeling cocky, Spangler thought vaguely, but he isn't. Why, why—

"E's still in danger, Commissioner. 'E's not responsible for 'is own actions. You've got to convince 'im that you weren't after Wei at all, and that Wei's all right, otherwise I believe 'e'll try to kill 'imself."

"I don't understand you," Spangler said. "How do you know the doctors or nurses haven't already told him?"

"I told them not to say anything," Pembun said, unabashed, "and let them think the order came from you."

Spangler's lips tightened. "We'll talk about this later," he said, and palmed the doorplate.

Cassina's eyes were closed. His face was a dead olive-grey except for a slight flush on either cheekbone. He had the stupid, defenseless look of all sleeping invalids.

His head was supported by a hollow in the bolster; a rigid harness covered his neck. His mouth was slightly open under the coarse black mustachios, and a curved suction tube was hooked over his lower teeth.

The tube emitted a low, monotonous gurgling, which changed abruptly to a dry sucking noise. An attendant stepped forward and joggled the tube with one finger.

As Spangler glanced away from the unconscious man, a medic came forward. He was tall and loose-limbed; his brown eyes gleamed with the brilliance that meant contact lenses. "Commissioner Spangler?"

Spangler nodded.

"I'm Dr. Householder, in charge of this section. You can question this man now, but I want you to avoid exciting him if you can, and don't stay longer than fifteen minutes after the injection. He's got half the pharmacopoeia in him already."

Spangler stepped forward and sat down by the bedside. At Householder's nod, a horse-faced female attendant set the muzzle of a pressure hypodermic against Cassina's bare forearm. She pressed the trigger, then unscrewed the magazine, dropped it into a tray and replaced it with another. In a moment Cassina sighed and opened his eyes.

Another attendant set a metal plate on the bed under Cassina's hand and gently forced a stylus between his fingers. Cables from plate and stylus led back around the foot of the bed to a squat, wheeled machine with a hooded screen. The attendant went to the machine, snapped a switch and then sat down beside it.

Cassina's eyes turned slowly until he discovered Spangler. He frowned, and seemed to be trying to speak. His lips moved minutely, but his jaw still hung open, with the suction tube hooked inside it. The monotonous gurgling of withdrawn sputum continued.

"Don't try to talk," Spangler said. "Your throat and jaws are immobilized. Use the stylus."

Cassina glanced downward, and his hand clenched around the slender metal cylinder. After a moment he wrote, "What have you done to Wei?"

The words crawled like black snakes across the white screen. Spangler nodded, and the attendant turned a knob; the writing vanished.

Spangler looked thoughtfully at Cassina. The question he had been expecting was "What happened?"—meaning "What happened to me?" In the circumstances, the question was almost a certainty—probability point nine nine nine.

But Cassina had asked about Wei instead.

Grudgingly, Spangler said, "Nothing, Colonel. We weren't after Captain Wei, you know. The Rithian spy had concealed itself in his room. We couldn't warn Wei without alerting the Rithian."

Cassina stared gravely at Spangler, as if trying to decide whether he were lying. Spangler abruptly found himself gripping his knees painfully hard.

"He's all right?" Cassina scrawled.

"Perfectly," said Spangler. "Everything's all right. We've got the Rithian, and the alert is over."

Cassina drew a deep breath and let it out again. His mouth still hung idiotically slack, but his eyes smiled. He wrote, "What have you got me in this straitjacket for?"

"You were injured in the struggle. You'll be fit again in a few days. We're going to put you back to sleep now." Spangler motioned; the horse-faced girl pressed the hypo against Cassina's arm and pressed the trigger.

After a moment she said, "Colonel Cassina, we want you to write the numbers from one to fifty. Begin, please."

At "15" the scrawled numerals began to grow larger, less controlled; "23" was repeated twice, followed by a wild "17".

The attendant nodded. "He's under."

It was long after office hours, but Spangler still sat behind his desk. He had switched off the overhead and illumination; the only light came from the reading screen in front of him. The screen showed a portion of the transcript of his interview with Cassina.

Spangler flipped over a switch and ran the spool back to the beginning. He read the opening lines again:

Q.: Can you hear me, Colonel?

A.: Yes.

Q.: I want you to answer these questions clearly, truthfully and fully to the best of your ability. When and where did you first meet Captain Wei?

A.: In Daressalam, in October, 2501.

Q.: Are you certain of that? Are you telling the truth?

A.: Yes.

Cassina's conscious mind was convinced that he had first met "Wei" twenty years ago in the African District. Several repetitions of the question failed to produce any other answer. Spangler had tried to get around the obstacle by asking for the first meeting after February 18, 2521—the date of the Rithian agents' discovery by the city patrol.

He skipped a score of lines and read:

Q.: What happened after that dinner?

A.: I invited him to my quarters. We sat and talked.

Q.: What was said?

A.: (2 sec. pause) I don't remember exactly.

Q.: You are ordered to remember. What did Wei say?

A.: (3 sec. pause) He told me—said he was Capt. Wei, served under me in the African District from 2501 to 2507. He—

Q.: But you knew that already, didn't you?

A.: Yes. No. (2 sec. pause) I don't remember.

Q.: I will rephrase the question. Did you or did you not know prior to that evening that Wei had served under you in the African District?

A.: (3 sec. pause) No.

Q.: What else did he tell you that night?

A.: Said he had done Naval Security work. Said he had applied for transfer, to be attached to me as my aide.

Q.: Did he tell you anything else, either instructions or information, other than details of your former acquaintance or details about his transfer, that evening?

A.: No.

Q.: Skip to your next meeting. What did he say then?

Gradually the whole story had come out, except one point. Spangler had struck a snag when he came to the evening of the 20th, two days ago.

Q.: What did Wei tell you that evening?

A.: (4 sec. pause) I don't remember. Nothing.

Q.: You are ordered to remember. What did he tell you?

A.: (6 sec. pause: subject shows great agitation) Nothing, I tell you.

Q.: You are ordered to answer, Colonel Cassina.

A.: (subject does not reply; at end of five seconds begins to weep)

Dr. Householder: The fifteen minutes are up, Commissioner. End transcript 12.52 hrs 2/22/2521.

Later in the afternoon, after his first report to Keith-Ingram, Spangler had had another session with Cassina under the interrogation machine. He had drawn another blank, and had had to give up after five minutes because of Cassina's increasing distress. On being released from the machine, Cassina had gone into a coma and Householder declared that it would be dangerous to question him again until further notice.

Half an hour later, while he was talking to Pembun, Spangler had had a report that Cassina, still apparently unconscious, had made a strenuous effort to tear himself free of the protective collar and had gone into massive hemorrhage. He was now totally restrained, drugged, receiving continuous transfusion, and on the critical list.

Pembun. Pembun, Pembun. There was no escaping him: no matter where your thoughts led you, Pembun popped up at the end of the trail, as if you were Alice trying to get out of the looking-glass garden.

Pembun had been right again; Pembun was always right. They had triggered some post-hypnotic command in Cassina's mind, and Cassina, twitching to the tug of that string, had done his best to kill himself.

"It seems to me," Pembun had said that afternoon, "that the main question is—w'y did Colonel Cassina try so 'ard to get to the Rithch w'en 'e found out you were after 'im? 'E 'ad a command to do it, of course, but w'y? Not jus' to warn the Rithch, becawse 'e didn' get enough warning that way to do 'im any good, an' besides, if it was only that, w'y did the Rithch try to kill Cassina?"

"All right," Spangler had said, keeping his voice level with difficulty. "What is your explanation, Mr. Pembun?"

"Well, the Rithch mus' 'ave left some information buried

in Cassina's subconscious that 'e didn' want us to find. I 'ad an idea that was it, and that's w'y I asked you not to tell Cassina the Rithch was dead—I thought 'e might 'ave been given another command, to commit suicide if the Rithch was discovered. I think we're lucky to 'ave Colonel Cassina alive today, Commissioner; I b'lieve 'e's the most important man in the Empire right now."

"That's a trifle strong," Spangler had said. "I won't deny that this buried information, whatever it is, must be valuable. But what makes you assume that it's crucial? Presumably, it's a record of the Rithians' espionage or sabotage activities. . . ."

"Sabotage," Pembun had said quickly. "It couldn' be the other, Commissioner, because the Rithch wouldn' care that much if you found out something you already know. I b'lieve Cassina knows this: 'E knows w'ere the bombs are buried."

"Bombs!" Spangler had said after a moment. The idea was absurd. "They wouldn't be so stupid, Mr. Pembun. We have military installations on two hundred sixty planets, not to mention the fleet in space. We'd retaliate, man. It would be suicide for them to bomb us."

"You don' understand, Commissioner. They don' want to bomb Earth—if they did, there wouldn' 'ave been any need for the Rithch to leave a record of w'ere the bombs were. 'E'd simply set them with a time mechanism, and that would be that. We couldn' do a thing till after they went off. But 'e was the last one alive, an' 'e couldn' be sure 'e'd get back with 'is information, so 'e 'ad to leave a record. That only means one thing. The Rithi jus' want to be able to say, '*Leave us alone—or else.*'"

Spangler's mind had worked furiously. It was terrifyingly possible; he could find no flaw in it. Suitably placed, a few score medium-sized disruption bombs would break a planet apart like a rotten apple. "Medium-sized" meant approximately six cubic centimeters; they would be easy to smuggle, easy to conceal, almost impossible to find. The only defense would be a radio-frequency screen over the whole planet; and if the enemy knew the precise locations of the bombs, even that defense would not work: a tight directional beam, accurately aimed, would get through and trigger the bombs. All it required was a race stubborn enough to say, "Leave us alone—or else"—and mean it. From what Pem-

bun had said about the Rithians, they might well be such a race.

But Earth played the percentages. Earth took only calculated risks. Earth would have to succumb.

That chain of reasoning had taken only a fraction of a second. Spangler examined it, compared it with the known facts, and discarded it. He smiled.

"But, Mr. Pembun—we've got Cassina. It doesn't matter whether we get the information out of him or not; all we care about is that the *Rithians* aren't going to get it."

Pembun had looked absurdly mournful. "No—you're assuming that Cassina is the only one 'oo's got the information. I wish that was so, but I don't see 'ow it can be. Don't you see, giving it to Colonel Cassina was a mistake, because 'is mind is the obvious place for us to look. Now, I can see the Rithch making that mistake, deliberately, because it struck 'im so funny 'e couldn' resist it—but I can't see 'im making that mistake because 'e was stupid. I think Colonel Cassina was jus' an after-thought: 'e was feeling cocky, and 'e decided to plant the message one more time right under your noses. I think 'e and 'is friends 'ad *already* planted it a 'undred or two 'undred times, 'owever many they 'ad time for. An' if it was me, I would 'ave picked interstellar travelers—agents for trading companies, executives who travel by spaceship a lot, visitors to Earth from other systems. I think that's w'at they did. If they did it, it's pract'ly a mathematical certainty that their agents will eventually reach one of those people. You could keep up the embargo, not let anybody leave, but 'ow long would it take?"

"Years," Spangler had said curtly.

"That's right. It could be done, and if you were lucky it might work. But it would kill Earth just as sure as blowing it up. . . . We've got to find out w'at Colonel Cassina knows."

VII

AFTER THAT had come the news about Cassina, almost as if it had been timed to underscore Pembun's words. Then the second and more painful interview with Keith-Ingram. Then

Spangler had turned to some of the routine matters that had been filling his in-box all day, and quite suddenly it had been quitting time.

Spangler had started to leave, but had stopped at the door, turned to look at the silent, comforting walls, turned around and sat down at his desk again. Acting on an impulse he could hardly explain, he had called Joanna and begged off taking her to dinner. He had been sitting there, hardly moving, ever since.

He pressed the stud of his thumb-watch. "Eighteen eleven and one quarter."

Three hours; and he had had no dinner. There was a sickish taste in his mouth, and he felt a little light-headed, but not at all hungry.

He thumbed open the revolving front of the desk, took out a dispenser vial of pick-me-ups, and swallowed one moodily.

A vast weariness and distaste for his work and everything it implied was rising in him. He suppressed it grimly. He had known such moods before; they passed. Boredom and disgust were like the pangs of dyspepsia: you ignored them, and did your work.

It came down to this, Spangler thought slowly. They had been very nearly beaten; except for one man—Pembun—they would have been beaten. And that was all wrong.

Pembun was uncouth, ill-educated, unmannered. His methods were the merest improvisation. He had intelligence, one was forced to admit, but it was crude, untutored and undirected. But he got results.

Why?

It was possible to explain all the events of the past two days simply by saying that Pembun had happened to possess special knowledge, not available to Security, which had happened to be just the knowledge needed. But that was an evasion. The knowledge was not "special"; it was knowledge Earth should have had, and had tried to get, and had failed to get.

Again, *why?*

It seemed to Spangler that since Pembun's arrival the universe had slowly, almost imperceptibly turned over until it was upside down. And yet nothing had changed. Pembun was the same; so were Spangler and the rest of the world he knew.

It was a little like one of those optical illusions that you got in Primary Camouflage—a series of cubes that formed a flight of stairs going upward; and then you blinked, and the cubes were hollow, or the stairs were hanging upside down. Or like the other kind, the silhouettes of two men, with converging perspective lines at the top and bottom: you thought one man was much taller, but when you measured them you found that both were the same—or even that the one that had seemed smaller was larger than the other. . . .

Spangler swore. He had been on the point, he realized, of getting up, taking a scooter to G level, suite 111, and asking Pembun humbly to explain to him why the sun now revolved around the Earth, black was white, and great acorns from little oak trees grew.

He picked up a memocube and flung it violently onto the desk again.

The gesture gave him no relief; the feeling of rebellion passed, depression and bewilderment remained.

Like a moth to the flame—like Mahomet to the mountain—Spangler went to Pembun.

This time the door was closed.

After the space of three heartbeats, the scooter moved off silently down the way he had come, lights winking on ahead of it in the deserted corridor and fading when it passed. It turned the corner at Upsilon and disappeared, heading for the invisible lategoer who had signaled it.

Silence.

Down the corridor for five meters in either direction, glareless overhead lights showed Spangler every detail of the satin-finished walls, the mathematical lines of doors and maintenance hatches, the almost invisible foot-traces that, some time during the night, would be vibrated into molecular dust and then gulped by suction tubes. Beyond was nothing but darkness. Far away, a tiny dot of light flared for an instant, like a shooting star, as someone crossed the corridor.

Spangler had an instant's vision of what it would be like if the whole thing were to stop: the miles of empty corridors, the stagnant air, and the darkness, the drifting dust, the slow invasion of insects. The dead weight of the Hill, bearing invisibly down upon you: terrible, insentient weight; weight of a corpse.

Spangler had forced himself into the channel of his ambi-

tion, and held himself there without deviation for ten long years. It had not been easy, with the handicap of his birth. He had remade himself with agonizing care, until he was more aristocratic than the aristocrats. He had suppressed everything that did not contribute, emphasized and nurtured everything that did. He had built, he thought, upon a rock.

And now, if that rock crumbled. . . .

Swallowing bile, he put his hand over the doorplate.

There was a long pause before the door slid open. Pembun, in underblouse and pantaloons, blinked at him as if he had been asleep. "Oh—Commissioner Spangler. Come awn in."

Spangler said roughly, "I'm disturbing you, I'm afraid. It isn't anything urgent; I'll talk with you tomorrow."

"No, please do come in, Commissioner. I'm glad you came. I was getting a little morbid, sitting 'ere by myself."

He closed the door behind Spangler. "Drink? I've still got 'alf the w'iskey left, and all the soda."

The thought of a drink made Spangler's stomach crawl. He refused it and sat down.

On the table beside the recliner were several sheets of paper and an ornate old-fashioned electropen.

"I was jus' writing a letter to my wife," Pembun said, following his glance. "Or trying to." He smiled. "I can't tell 'er anything important without violating security, and I know I'll prob'ly get back to Ganymede before a letter would, after the embargo is lifted, any'ow, so there rilly wasn' much sense to it. It was jus' something to do."

Spangler nodded. "It's a pity we can't let you leave the Hill. But there's an amusement section right here—cinemas, autochess, dream rooms, baths—"

Pembun shook his head, still smiling. "I wouldn't take any pleasure in those things, Commissioner."

His tone, it seemed to Spangler, was half regretful, half indulgent. No doubt they had other, more vigorous pleasures on Manhaven. Narcotics and mixed bathing would seem to them effete or incomprehensible.

Without knowing what he was about to say, he blurted, "Tell me truthfully, Pembun—do you despise us?"

Pembun's eyes widened slightly, then narrowed, and his whole face subtly congealed. "I try not to," he said quietly. "It's too easy. Did you come 'ere to ask me that, Commissioner?"

Spangler leaned forward, elbows on knees, clasping his

hands together, "I think I did," he said. "Forgive my rudeness, Pembun, but I really want to know. What's wrong with us, in your view? What would you change, if you could?"

Pembun said carefully, "W'at would you say was your motive for asking that, Commissioner?"

Spangler glanced up.

From this angle, Pembun looked more impressive. Spangler stared at him in a kind of rapture of discovery: the man's face was neither ugly nor ludicrous. The eyes were steady and alive with intelligence; the wide mouth was firm. Even the outsize ears, the heavy cheeks, only gave the face added strength and a curious dignity.

He said, "I want information. I've misjudged you grossly—and I apologize, but that's not enough. I feel that there must be something wrong with my basic assumptions, with the Empire. I want to know why we failed in this Rithian affair, and you succeeded. I think you can help me, if you will."

He waited.

Pembun said slowly, "Commissioner, I think you 'ave another motive, w'ether you rillize it consciously or not. Let me tell it to you, and see if you agree. Did you ever 'ear of pecking precedence in 'ens?"

"No," said Spangler. "By the way, call me Spangler, or Thorne, won't you?"

"All right—Thorne. You can cawl me Jawj, if you like. Now, about the 'ens. Say there are twelve in a yard. If you watch them, you'll find out that they 'ave a rigid social 'ierarchy. 'En A gets to peck all the others, 'en B pecks all the others, but A, C pecks all but A and B, and so on down to 'en L, 'oo gets pecked by everybody and can't peck anybody back."

"Yes," said Spangler, "I see."

Pembun went on woodenly, "You're 'en B or C in the same kind of a system. There are one or two superiors that lord it over you, and you do the same to the rest. Now, usually w'en anybody new comes into the yard, you know right away w'ether it's someone 'oo pecks you or gets pecked. But I'm a diff'rent case. I'm a diff'rent breed of 'en, and I don't rilly belong in your yard at all, so you try not to peck me excep' w'en I provoke you; it would lower your dignity. That's until you suddenly find that *I'm pecking you*. Now you've

got to fit me into the system above yourself, becawse all this pecking wouldn' be endurable if you got it from both directions. So you came 'ere to say, 'I know you're 'igher in the scale than me, so it's all right. Go a'ead—peck me.' ”

Spangler stared at him in silence. He was interested to observe that although he felt humiliated, the emotion was not actually unpleasant. It's a species of purge, he thought. It's good for us all to be taken down a peg now and then.

“W'at's more,” Pembun said, watching him, “you enjoy it. It's a pleasure to you to kowtow to somebody you think is stronger. It gives you a feeling of security. Isn' that true?”

“I won't say you're wrong,” Spangler answered, trying to be honest. “I've never heard it expressed just that way before, but it's certainly true that I'm conditioned to accept and exert authority—and you're quite right, I enjoy both acts. It's a necessary state of mind in my profession, or so I've always believed. I suppose it isn't very pretty, looked at objectively.”

Pembun started to reach for the whiskey decanter, then drew his hand back. He looked at Spangler with a wry smile. “W'at you don' rillize,” he said, “is that I get no pleasure out of it. This may be 'ard for you to understand, but it's no fun for me to 'it a man 'oo's not trying to 'it me back. This 'ole conversation 'as been unpleasant to me, but I couldn' avoid it. You put me in a position w'ere no matter w'at I said, even if I refused to talk to you at awl, I'd be doing w'at you wanted. And this is the funny part, Commissioner—in making me 'urt your self-esteem, you've 'urt mine twice as bad. I expec' I'll 'ave a bad taste in my mouth for days.”

Spangler stood up slowly. He took two deep breaths, but his sudden anger did not subside; it grew. He said carefully, “I don't need to have a mountain fall on me. That's a quaint expression we have, Mr. Pembun—it means that one clear and studied insult is enough.”

Suddenly Pembun was just what he had seemed in the beginning: an irritating, dirty-faced, ugly little beast of a *colonial*.

Pembun said, “You see, now you're angry. That's becawse I wouldn' play the pecking game with you.”

Spangler said furiously, “Mr. Pembun, I didn't come here for insults, or for barnyard psychology either. I came to ask you for information. If you are so far lost to common civility—” The sentence slipped out of his grasp; he started

again: "Perhaps I had better remind you that I'm empowered to *demand* your help as an official of the Empire."

Pembun said, unruffled, "I'm 'ere to 'elp if I can, Commissioner. W'at was it you wanted, exactly?"

"I asked you," said Spangler, "to tell me what, in your opinion, were the causes of Security and War Department failure in the Rithian case." As Pembun started to speak, he cut in: "Put your remarks on a spool, and have it on my desk in the morning." His voice sounded unnaturally loud in his own ears; it occurred to him with a shock that he had been shouting.

Pembun shook his head sadly, reprovingly. "I'll be glad to—if you put your request in writing, Commissioner."

Spangler clenched his jaw. "You'll get it tomorrow," he said. He turned, opened the door and strode away down the empty corridor. He did not stop to signal for a scooter until he had turned the corner, and Pembun's doorway was out of sight.

VIII

HE FOUND Joanna in the tower room, lying against a section of the couch that was elevated to form a backrest. The room was filled, choked to bursting by a male voice shouting incomprehensible syllables against a strident orchestral background. Spangler's brain struggled futilely with the words for an instant, then rejected them in disgust: the recording was one of Joanna's period collection, sung in one of the dead languages. German; full of long vowels and fruity sibilants.

She waved her hand over the control box, and the volume diminished to a bearable level. She stood up and came to meet him.

"I thought you sounded upset when you called," she said, kissing him. "Sit here. Put your feet up. Have you had anything to eat?"

"No," said Spangler. "I couldn't. I'm too tired for food."

"I'll have something up. You needn't eat it if you don't want to."

"Fine," he said with an effort.

She dialed the antique food-selector at the side of the couch, then came to sit beside him.

The voice was still shouting, but as if it were a long distance away. It rose to a crescendo, there was a dying gasp from the orchestra, a moment's pause, and then another song began.

"Why don't you have that translated?" he said irritably.

"I don't know; I rather like it as it is. Shall I turn it off?"

"That's not the point," said Spangler with controlled impatience. "You like it as it is—why? Because it's incomprehensible? Is that a sane reason?"

The food-selector's light glowed. Joanna opened the hopper, took out a tube of broth and a sandwich loaf, and put them on the table at Spangler's side.

"What are you really angry about, Thorne?" she asked quietly.

"I'll tell you," said Spangler, sitting upright. The words spilled out of him, beyond his control. "Do you think it isn't obvious to me, and to everyone else who knows you, what you're doing to yourself with this morbid obsession? Do you think it's pleasant for me to sit here and watch you wallowing in the past, like a dog in carrion, because you're afraid of anything that hasn't been safely buried for four hundred years?"

Her eyes widened with shock, and Spangler felt an answering wave of pure dark joy. This was what he had come to do, he realized, though he hadn't known it before. It was what he should have done long ago.

She blushed furiously from forehead to breast, then turned ivory-pale.

"Stop it," she said in a tight voice.

"I won't stop," Spangler said, biting the words. "Look at yourself. You're half-alive, half a woman. You let just enough of yourself live to do your work, and answer when you're spoken to, and respond to your lover. The rest is dead and covered with dust. I can taste it when I kiss you. How do you think I feel, wanting you, knowing that you're out of my reach—not because—"

She got up and started toward the door. Spangler reached her in one stride, flung her backward onto the couch and held her there with his whole weight.

"—not because you belong to anyone else, or ever will, but because you're too timid, too selfish, too wrapped up in yourself ever to belong to anybody?"

She struggled ineffectively. Her eyes were unfocused and glazed with tears; her whole body was trembling.

Spangler tore open her robe, pulled it away from her body. "Go ahead, look at yourself! You're a woman, a living human being, not a mummy. Why is that so hateful? Do you get any pleasure from killing yourself and everything you touch?" He shook her. "Answer me."

She gasped, "I can't—"

"Why can't you? You can feel, you can speak, you can do anything that a normal human being can do, but you won't. You wouldn't leave that smug little shell of yours to save a life. You wouldn't leave it to save the Empire—not even to save yourself."

"Let me go."

"You're not sick, you're not afraid, you're just selfish. Cold and selfish. Everything for Joanna, and let the rest of the universe go hang!"

"Let me go."

Her trembling had stopped; she was still breathing hard, but her pale lips were firm. She raised her lids and looked at him squarely, without blinking.

Spangler raised his open right hand and struck her in the face. Her head bobbed. She looked at him incredulously, and her mouth opened.

Spangler hit her again. At the third blow, the tears started afresh. Her face crumpled suddenly and a series of short, animal sounds came out of her. At the fourth, she stopped trying to turn her head aside. Her body was limp, her eyes closed and without expression. Her sobs were as mechanical and meaningless as a fit of the hiccoughs.

Spangler rolled away from her, stood up, and went to the recliner. He felt purged and empty, listless and light. He said tonelessly, "You can get up now. I won't hit you again."

After a moment she sat up, spine curved, head hanging. When she got to her feet and turned toward the bathroom door, Spangler followed and stepped in front of her, grasping her arm.

"Listen to me," he said. "You're going to marry me, and we're going to be happy. Do you understand that?"

She looked up at him without interest.

"You fool," she said.

She stood quietly until he let her go, and then moved without haste through the doorway. The door closed behind her, and Spangler heard the lock click.

Spangler entered his office, as he usually did, half an hour before the official opening time. He had sat up for a long time after leaving Joanna's tower the night before, and had slept badly afterwards. This morning he had a headache which the pick-me-ups would not entirely suppress; but his mind felt cold and clear. He knew precisely what he wanted to do.

Last night's blunder was not irreparable. It was all but disastrous; it was criminally foolish; it had set him back at least six months; but it had not beaten him.

His first move would be to send her a present: something she would prize too much to reject—old paintings, or books or recordings. Very likely there would be something of the sort among the property seized by the Department in treason cases; if not, he would get it from a private collector. He had already composed the note to go with the gift: it was humble without servility, regretful without hope. It implied that he would not see her again; and he would not—not for at least a month.

The last three weeks of that time Spangler had allotted to grand strategy—planting rumors, certain to reach Joanna: that he was overworking; that he never smiled; that he was ill but had refused treatment. That sort of thing, details to be worked out later.

The first week was dedicated to an altogether different purpose. His ruinous outburst last night had at least had one salutary effect; it had taught Spangler that he could not fight both battles at once. Commencing today, his total energies would be aimed at one objective: to crush Pembun.

It could be done; it would be done. He had underestimated the man, but that was over. From now on, things would be different.

On his desk was a spool of summarized reports addressed to him from Keith-Ingram.

The activities of the Rithians, it seemed, had now been partially traced: eight of them, traveling together, had reached Earth as passengers aboard a second-rate tramp freighter, docking at Stambul, on the evening of February 10th. From Stambul they were known to have taken the stratosphere ex-

press to Paris, but no further trace of their movements had so far turned up until they appeared in Angels on the 18th, with one exception: the eighth Rithian had shipped out aboard a liner leaving for the Capri system on the 12th, only two days after the group had arrived. It had disembarked at Lumi, where its trail ended. Doubtless, Spangler thought, it had changed its disguise there and continued by a devious route. By now it was back in the Rithian system.

Its return before the others' was puzzling. Obviously the group had not finished its collective task, or the others would have got out too; either it had had a separate assignment, which it had completed before the others, or some single item of information had been turned up which the Rithians thought sufficiently important to send a messenger back with it immediately.

He glanced quickly through the conference schedule which Miss Timoney had made up the previous afternoon, then laid it aside and spent the rest of his half-hour in dictating notes to Pembun, Keith-Ingram and Dr. Baustian.

The note to Pembun repeated yesterday's question, word for word.

Keith-Ingram's reported the condition of Colonel Cassina and gave Pembun's analysis of the situation, without comment.

Baustian's requested him to submit, as soon as possible, a reliable procedure for identifying Rithians masquerading as human beings.

Pembun's reply popped into his in-box almost immediately; the man must have prepared it last night and held it ready for Spangler's formal request.

He put the spool viciously into the screen slot and skimmed through it. It was in reasonably good Standard; so good in fact, that Spangler conceived an instant suspicion that Pembun could speak Standard acceptably, that is, when he chose to.

The document read, in part:

In my judgment, the most serious weakness of Empire executive personnel is an excessive reliance on prescribed methods and regulations, and inadequate emphasis on original thinking and personal initiative. I am aware that

this is in accord with overall policy, which would be difficult if not impossible to alter completely within the framework of the Empire, but it is my feeling that attention should be given to this problem at high policy levels, and efforts made to alter existing conditions if possible.

It is not within my competence to suggest a mode of procedure, especially since the problem appears to be partly philosophical in nature. The tendency of Empire executive personnel to interpret regulations and directives in a rigid and literal manner, is in my opinion clearly related to the increasing tendency toward standardization in Home World art, manners, customs and language. In the final category, I would cite the obsolescence of all Earth language except Standard, and in Standard the gradual elimination of homonyms and synonyms, as well as the increasing tendency to restrict words to a single meaning, as especially significant. . . .

Spangler removed the spool and tossed it into his "awaiting action" box. A moment later it was time for his first conference.

He had left word with Gordon to give him any message from Baustian as soon as it arrived. Forty-five minutes after the conference began, a spool popped into the in-box in front of him.

Colonel Medoc, Cassina's replacement, had been giving a long and enthusiastic account of certain difficulties encountered by the Fleet in maintaining the supra-Earth cordon, and the means by which they were being overcome. Medoc was the oldest man at the table, and fairly typical of the hold-overs from the last generation but one, when, owing to the shortage of governmental and military personnel caused by the almost-disastrous Cartagellan war, standards had been regrettably lax. He was the sort of man one automatically thought of as "not quite class": his manner was a little too exuberant, his gestures too wide, his talk imprecise and larded with anachronisms.

Spangler waited patiently until he paused to shrug, then cut in smoothly: "Thank you, Colonel. Now, before we continue, will you all pardon me a moment, please?"

He slipped the spool into place and lighted the reading screen. The note read:

Baustian, G. B., BuAlPhyl

2/23/2521

Spangler, T., Dept Secur

BAP CD18053990

MS MU

Ref DS CD50347251

1— Recommended procedure for identifying members of the Rithian race masquerading as humans is as follows:

2— Make 1.7 cm. perpendicular incision, using instrument coated with paste of attached composition (Schedule A), in mid-thigh or shoulder region of subject, Reagent, in combination with Rithian body fluids, will produce brilliant purple precipitate. No reaction will take place in contact with human flesh.

3— For convenience of use, it is recommended that incision be made by agency of field-powered blade in standard grip casing, as in attached sketches. (Schedule B).

4— If desired, blade coating may also contain soporific believed to be effective in Rithian body chemistry. (Schedule C).

5— End.

Attn BAP CD18053990A

BAP CD18053990B

BAP CD18053990C

Spangler smiled and cleared the screen.

"The information is satisfactory, Commissioner?" Colonel Medoc demanded brightly.

"Quite satisfactory, Colonel." Quickly, so as to give Medoc no opportunity to launch himself into his subject again, Spangler turned to Pemberton, the mayor's aide. "Mr. Pemberton?"

The young man began querulously, "We don't want to seem impatient, Commissioner, but you know that our office is under considerable pressure. Now, you've given us to understand that the Rithian has already been captured and killed, and what we want to know is, how much longer. . . ."

Spangler heard him out as patiently, to all outward appearances, as if he had not heard the same complaint daily since the embargo began. He put Pemberton off smoothly but noncommittally, and adjourned the conference.

Back in his office, Spangler finished reading Baustian's note and dictated an endorsement of paragraphs one to three. Paragraph four was a good notion, but anything with a rider like that on it would take twice as long to go through channels.

Spangler rewound the spool and set the machine to make three copies, one of which he addressed to Keith-Ingram, one to Baustian and the third to the man in charge of the fabricators assigned to Security, with an AAA priority. Then he took our Pembun's message and read it through very carefully:

With regard to the assumed success of the Rithian pseudo-hypnosis against Empire agents, I would again suggest that the basic fault may be deeply rooted in the social complex of Earth, and in the rigid organization of Empire administration. On most of the outworlds of the writer's experience, good hypnotic subjects are in a minority, but my impression is that this is not the case on Earth, at least among Empire personnel. It may be said that a man who has successfully absorbed all the unspoken assumptions and conditioned attitudes, required of him by responsible position in the Empire, is already half hypnotized; or to put it differently, that non-suggestible minds tend to be weeded out by the systems of selection and promotion in use. For example, the addressee, Commissioner T. Spangler, is in the writer's opinion suggestible in the extreme. . . .

Spangler grinned angrily and rewound the spool.

How typical of the man that report was!—a solid gelatinous mass of naiveté surrounding one tiny thorn of shrewdness. In Pembun's place, Spangler would simply have disclaimed ability to answer the question. Since Pembun was not employed by any department concerned, the reply would have been plausible and correct; nothing more could ever have come of it.

That must have occurred to Pembun; and yet he had gone stolidly ahead to answer the question fully, and, Spangler was ready to believe, honestly. It was a damaging document; some phrases in it, particularly "within the framework of the Empire", could be interpreted as treasonable. But he had

written it; and then he had slipped in that comment about Spangler.

That comment was just damaging enough to Spangler to offset the mildly damaging admissions Pembun had made about himself. Therefore Pembun had actually taken no risk at all. But why had he troubled to dictate a carefully-phrased quarter-spool to be buried in the files, when a disclaimer, in two lines, would have served? Just for "something to do"?

Spangler thought not. There was a curious coherence in Pembun's oddities: they all hung together somehow. Wincing, he forced himself to go back over the recollection of last night. There again, from the normal point of view, Pembun had given himself unnecessary difficulty. Confronted with that inconvenient question of Spangler's, "What's wrong with the Empire?" and the even more embarrassing, "Do you despise us?" any ordinary person would simply have lied.

At any rate, Pembun, by his own statement, had got no pleasure from telling the truth. What was that remark? "... a bad taste . . ." Never mind. What emerged from all this, Spangler thought, was the picture of a man who was compulsively, almost pathologically honest. Yes, that expressed it. His frankness was not even ethico-religious in character: it was symbolic, a *gesture*.

Spangler felt himself flushing, and his lips tightened.

The question remained: What did the man want?

He had no answer yet; but he had a feeling that he was getting closer.

IX

AT ELEVEN hours a report came from the head of the infirmary's psychiatric section: the information Security wanted from Colonel Cassina was still unavailable and in PsytSec's opinion could not be forced from him without a high probability of destroying the subject's personality. Did Spangler have the necessary priority to list Colonel Cassina as expendable?

At eleven-ten, a call came through from Keith-Ingram.

"On this Cassina affair, Thorne, what progress are you making?"

Spangler told him.

Keith-Ingram rubbed his square chin thoughtfully. "That's unfortunate," he said. "If you want my view, the Empire can spare Colonel Cassina, all right, but I'll have to go to the High Assembly for permission, and the Navy will fight it, naturally. I rather wish there were another way. Have you consulted Pembun about this?"

"The report had just come in when you called."

"Well, let's get this cleaned up now, if we can. Get him on a three-way, will you?"

Face stony, Spangler made the necessary connections. The image of Keith-Ingram dwindled and moved over to occupy one half of the screen. In the other half, Pembun appeared.

Keith-Ingram said, "Now, Mr. Pembun, you've helped us out of the stew right along through this affair. Have you any suggestions that might be useful in this phase of it?"

Pembun's expression was blandly attentive. He said, "My, that would be a 'ard decision to make. Let me think a minute."

Out of screen range, Spangler's fingers moved spasmodically over the control buttons at the edge of his desk.

Finally Pembun looked up. "I got one notion," he said. "It's kind of a long chance, but if it works it will get you the information you want without 'urting the Colonel. I was thinking that w'en the Rithi planted that information, they mus' 'ave given their subject some kind of a trigger stimulus to unlock the message. Now if the trigger is verbal, we 'aven' got a chance of 'itting it by accident. But it jus' now struck me that the trigger might be a situation instead of a phrase or a sentence. I mean, it might be a combination of diff'rent kinds of stimuli—a certain smell, say, plus a certain color of the light, plus a certain temperature range, and so on."

"That doesn't sound a great deal more hopeful, Mr. Pembun," Spangler put in.

"Wait," said Keith-Ingram, "I think I see what he's getting at. You mean, don't you, Mr. Pembun, that the Rithians might have used as a stimulus complex the normal conditions on their home world?"

"That's it," Pembun told him with a smile. "We can't be sure they did, of cawse, but it seems to me there's a fair

chance. Any'ow, it isn' as far-fetched as it sounds, becawse those conditions would be available to the Rithi on any planet w're any number of them live. You wawk into a Rithch's 'ouse, an' you think you're on Sirach. They're use' to living in those vine cities of theirs, you know. They 'ate to be penned up. So w'en they 'ave to live in 'ouses, they put up vines in front of illusion screens, an' use artificial light an' scents, an' fool themselves that way."

"I see," said Keith-Ingram. "That sounds very good, Mr. Pembun; the only question that occurs to me is, can we duplicate those conditions accurately?"

"I should think so," Pembun answered. "It shouldn' be too 'ard."

"Well, I think we'll give it a trial, at any rate. What do you say, Thorne? Do you agree?"

Spangler could tell by the almost imperceptible arch of Keith-Ingram's right eyebrow, and the frozen expression of his mouth, that he knew Spangler didn't, and was enjoying the knowledge.

"Yes, by all means," said Spangler politely.

"That's settled then. I'll leave you and Thorne to work out the details. Clearing." His image faded out, leaving half the screen blank.

Spangler said coldly, "This is your project, Mr. Pembun, and I'll leave you entirely in charge of it. Requisition any space, materials and labor you need, and have the heads of sections call me for confirmation. I'll want reports twice daily. Are there any questions?"

"No questions, Commissioner."

"Clearing."

Spangler broke the connection, then dialed Keith-Ingram's number again. He got the "busy" response, as he expected, but left the circuit keyed in. Twenty minutes later Keith-Ingram's face appeared on the screen. "Yes, Spangler? What is it now? I'm rather busy."

Spangler said impassively, "There are two matters I wanted to discuss with you, Chief, and I thought it best not to bring them up while Pembun was on the circuit."

"Are they urgent?"

"Quite urgent."

"All right, then, what are they?"

"First," said Spangler, "I've sent you a note on a new test-

ing method of Baustian's, for detecting any future Rithian masqueraders. I'd like to ask you for permission to use it here in the Hill, in advance of final approval, on a provisional test basis."

"Why?"

"Just a precaution. We've found one Rithian here; I want to be perfectly sure there aren't any more."

Keith-Ingram nodded. "No harm in being sure. All right, Thorne, go ahead if you like. Now what else was there?"

"Just one thing more. I'm wondering if it wouldn't be a sound idea to open the question of Cassina's expendability anyhow, regardless of this scheme of Pembun's. If it turns out to be a frost, there'll be less delay before we can go ahead with the orthodox procedure." His stress on the word "orthodox" was delicate, but he knew Keith-Ingram had caught it.

The older man gazed silently at him for a moment. "As a matter of fact," he said, "it happens that I'd already thought of that. However, I may as well say that I have every confidence in Pembun. If all our personnel were as efficient as he is, Thorne, things would go a great deal more smoothly in this department."

Spangler said nothing.

"That's all then? Right. Clearing."

Recalling that conversation before he went to bed that night, Spangler thought, we'll see how much confidence you have in Pembun this time tomorrow.

Everything was ready by ten hours.

There was no puzzle, Spangler thought with satisfaction, without a solution. No matter how hopelessly involved and contradictory a situation might appear on the surface, or even some distance beneath it, if you kept on relentlessly, you would eventually arrive at the core, the quiet place where the elements of the problem lay exposed in their basic simplicity.

And this was the revelation that had been vouchsafed to Spangler:

The real struggle was between savagery and civilization, between magic and science, between the double meaning and the single meaning.

Pembun was on the side of ambiguity and lawlessness. Therefore he was an enemy.

What had blinded Spangler, blinded them all, was the self-evident fact that Pembun was *human*. Loyalty to a nation or

an idea is conditioned; but loyalty to the race is bred in the bone. As the old saying had it, "Blood is thicker than ichor."

Pembun's humanity was self-evident; but was it a fact?

"Wei" had been a human being, too—until the moment when he was unmasked as a monster.

Pembun belonged to a world so slovenly that Rithians were allowed to come and go as they pleased. Was it not more than possible, was it not almost a tactical certainty, that given opportunity and the made-to-order usefulness of Pembun's connection with the Empire, they had at the least made him their agent?

Or, at most, replaced him with one of themselves?

The idea was fantastic, certainly. The picture of Pembun playing the role of Rithian-killer deliberately betraying his own confederate in order to safe-guard his position, was straight out of one of those wild twentieth-century romances—the kind in which the detective turned out to be the murderer, the head of the Secret Police was also the leader of the Underground, and, as often as not, the subordinate hero was a beautiful girl disguised as a boy by the clever stratagem of cutting her hair.

But that was precisely the kind of world that Pembun came from, whether he was human or Rithian; that was the unchanging essence of the ancient Unreason, beaten now on Earth but not yet stamped out of the Cosmos. That was the enemy.

"Ten-oh-one," said his watch. In a few moments, now, one part of the question would be answered.

He glanced at the four men in workmen's coveralls who stood by an opened section of the wall. One of them held what appeared to be a cable cutter; the others had objects that looked like testing instruments and spare-part kits. The "cutter," underneath its camouflage shell, was an immobilizing field projector; the rest were energy weapons.

The men stood quietly, not talking, until a signal light flashed on Spangler's desk. He nodded, and they crouched nearer to the disemboweled wall, beginning a low-voice conversation. A moment later, Pembun appeared in the doorway.

Spangler glanced up from his reading screen, frowning. "Oh, yes—Pembun," he said. "Sit down a moment, will you?" He gestured to one of the chairs along the far wall. Pembun

sat, hands crossed limply in his lap, idly watching the workmen.

Spangler thumbed open the front of his desk and touched a stud; a meter needle swung over and held steady. The room was now split into two parts by a planar screen just in front of the desk. Spangler closed the microphone circuit which would carry his voice around the barrier.

The intercom glowed; Spangler put his hand over it. "Yes?"

The man said, as he had been instructed, "Commissioner, is Mr. Pembun in your office?"

"Yes, he is. Why?"

"It's that routine test, sir. You told us to give it to everybody who'd been in the Hill less than six months, and Mr. Pembun is on our list. If you're not too busy now—"

"Of course, he would be," Spangler said. "That hadn't occurred to me. All right, come in." He turned to Pembun. "You don't mind?"

"W'at is it?" Pembun asked.

"We have a new anti-Rithian test," Spangler explained easily. "We're just making absolutely certain there aren't any more Weis in the Hill. In your case, of course, it's only a formality."

Pembun's expression was hard to read, but Spangler thought he saw a trace of uneasiness there. He watched narrowly, as a white-smocked young man carrying a medical kit came in through the door to Pembun's right.

The workmen separated suddenly, and two of them started toward the door. When they had taken a few steps, one of them turned to call back to the remaining two. "You certain two UBX's will do it?"

"What's the matter, don't you think so?"

"It's up to you, but . . ." The men went on talking, while the medic approached Pembun and opened his kit. "Mr. Pembun?"

"Yes."

"Will you stand up and turn back your right sleeve, please?"

Pembun did as he was told. His upper arm was shapeless with overlaid fat and muscle, like a wrestler's. The medic placed one end of a chromed cylinder against the fleshy part of the shoulder, and pressed the release. Pembun started

violently and clapped his hand to the injury. When he took it away, there was a tiny spot of blood on his palm.

The medic extruded the cylinder's narrow blade and showed it to Spangler. "Negative, Commissioner."

Spangler cleared his throat. "Naturally," he said. The medic tore off a swab from his kit and wiped Pembun's wound, then put a tiny patch of bandage on it, closed his kit and went away.

Negative, Spangler thought. Too bad; it would have been gratifying to find out that Pembun had tentacles under that blubber. But it had been a pleasure to watch him jump, anyhow. He opened his desk and cut the field circuit.

The two workmen near the door finished their discussion and left. Spangler said to the remaining pair, "Will you wait outside for a few minutes, please?"

When they had gone, Pembun came forward and took the seat facing the desk. "That's a rough test," he said. "'Ow does it work?"

Spangler explained. "Sorry if it was unpleasant," he added, "but I believe it's more effective than the old one."

"Well, I'm glad I passed, any'ow," said Pembun, poker-faced.

"To be sure," said Spangler. "Now—your report, Mr. Pembun?"

"Well, I've 'ad a little trouble. I asked Colonel Medoc to see if 'e couldn' send somebody to Santos in the Shahpur system, to get some Rithian city-vines from the botanical gardens, there. 'E gave me to understand that you rifused the request."

"Yes, I'm sorry about that," Spangler said sympathetically. "Until this question is settled, we can't very well relax the embargo, especially not for an Out-world jump."

Pembun accepted that without comment. "Another thing that 'appened, I wanted copies of any Rithi films the War Department might 'ave, in 'opes that one of them would include a sequence of a Rithch I could use to build up the illusion there was a Rithch in the room. That was rifused too; I don' know w'ether it went through your office or not."

"No, this is the first I've heard of it," Spangler lied blandly, "but I'm not surprised. War is extremely touchy about its M. S. files—I'm afraid you'd better give up hope of any help there. Can't you make do without those two items?"

Pembun nodded. "I figured I might 'ave to, so I went a'ead and did the best I could. I don' promise it will work, be-cawse some of it is awful makeshift, but it's ready."

Spangler felt a muscle jump in his cheek. "It's ready *now*?" he demanded.

"We'enever you like, Commissioner." Pembun got up and turned toward the door.

Spangler made an instant decision. He had not planned to take the second step against Pembun until he had manufactured a plausible opportunity, but he couldn't let Pembun's examination of Cassina proceed. He said sharply, "Just a moment!" and added, "If you don't mind."

As Pembun paused, he put out his hand to the intercom. "Ask those workmen to step in here again, will you?"

The door opened, and all four of the pseudo-workmen trooped in. Pembun looked at them with an expression of mild surprise. "'Aven' you got those UBX's yet?" he asked.

No one answered him, Spangler said, "I'll trouble you to come down to the interrogation rooms with me, Mr. Pembun." At his gesture, the four men moved into position around Pembun, one on either side, two behind.

"Interrogation!" said Pembun. "W'y, Commissioner?"

"Not torture, I assure you," Spangler replied, coming around the desk. "Just interrogation, There are a few questions I want to ask you."

"Commissioner Spangler," said Pembun, "am I to understand that I'm suspected of a crime?"

"Mr. Pembun," Spangler answered, "please don't be childish. Security is empowered to question anyone, anywhere, at any time, and for any reason."

Following the initial struggle, Pembun had relaxed. He was breathing shallowly now, his eyes half open and unfocused.

"Have you got enough test patterns?" Spangler asked, using a finger-code.

"Yes, I think so, Commissioner," the young technician replied in the same manner. "His basics are very unusual, though. I may have some trouble interpreting when we get into second-orders."

"Do the best you can." He leaned forward, close to Pembun's head. "Can you still hear me, Pembun?" he said aloud.

"Yes."

"State your full name."

"Jawj Pero Pembun."

"How long have you been an agent of the Rithians?"

A pause. "I never was."

Spangler glanced at the technician, who signaled, "Emotional content about point six."

Spangler tried again. "When and where did you last meet a Rithian before coming to Earth?"

"In April, twenty-five fourteen, at the Spring Art show in Espar, Man'aven."

"Describe that meeting in detail."

"I was standing in the crowd, looking at a big canvas called 'Yeastley and the Tucker.' The Rithch came up and stood beside me. 'E pointed to the painting and said, 'Very amusing.' 'E was looking at the picture through a transformer, so the colors would make sense to 'im. I said, 'I've seen Rithi collages that looked funnier to me.' Then 'e showed me 'ow, by changing the transformer settings, you could make it look like Yeastley 'ad a mouldy face with warts on it, and . . ."

Pembun went on stolidly to the end of the incident; he and the Rithch, whose name he had never learned, had exchanged a few more remarks and then parted.

The emotional index of his statement did not rise above point nine on a scale of five.

"Before that, when and where was your last meeting with a Rithch?"

"On the street in Espar, early in December, twenty-five thirteen."

"Describe it."

Spangler went grimly on, taking Pembun farther and farther back through innumerable casual meetings. At the end of half an hour, Pembun's breathing was uneven and his forehead was splotched with perspiration. The technician gave him a second injection. Spangler resumed the questioning.

Finally:

". . . Describe the last meeting before that."

"There was none."

Spangler sat rigid for a long moment, then abruptly clenched his fists.

He stared down at Pembun's tortured face. At that moment he felt himself willing to risk the forcing procedures he had planned to use on Cassina, forgetting the conse-

quences; but there would be no profit in it. In Cassina's case, the material was there: it was only a question of applying enough force on the proper fulcrum to get it out. Here, either the material did not exist, or it was so well hidden that the most advanced Empire techniques would never find a hint of it.

But there had to be something: if not espionage, then treason.

Spangler said, "Pembun: In a war between the Rithians and the Empire, which side would you favor?"

"The Empire."

Hoarsely: "But as between the Rithian culture and that of the Empire, which do you prefer?"

"The Rithi."

"Why?"

"Because they 'aven' ossified themselves."

"Explain that."

"They 'aven' overspecialized. They're still yuman, in a sense of the word that's more meaningful than the natural-history sense. They're alive in a way that you can't say the Empire is alive. The Empire is like a robot brain with 'af the connections soldered shut. It can't adapt, so it's dying, but it's still big enough to be dangerous."

Spangler flicked a glance of triumph toward the technician. He said, "I will repeat, in the event of war between the Rithians and the Empire, which side would you favor?"

Pembun said, "The Empire."

Spangler persisted angrily, "How do you justify that statement, in the face of your admission that you prefer Rithian culture to Empire culture?"

"My personal preferences aren't important. It would be bad for the 'ole yuman race if the Empire cracked up too soon. The Outworlds aren't strong enough. It's too much to expect them to 'urry up and make themselves selfsufficient, w'en they can lean on the Empire through trade agreements. An' if they did, they'd 'ave to overspecialize too; they'd 'ave to subordinate everything else to building up their industrial and war potential. That would be worse than joining the Empire ag'in. The Empire 'as to be kept alive *now*. In another five centuries or so, it won't matter."

Spangler stared a question at the technician, who signaled: "Emotional content one point seven."

One seven: normal for a true statement of a profound con-

viction. A falsehood, spoken against the truth-compulsion of the drug, would have generated at least 3.0.

So it had all slipped out of his hands again. Pembun's statement was damaging; it would be a black mark on his dossier: but it was not criminal. There was nothing in it to justify the interrogation: it was hardly more than Pembun had given freely in that report of his.

Spangler made one more attempt. "From the time I met you at the spaceport to the present, have you ever lied to me?"

A pause. "Yes."

"How many times?"

"Once."

Spangler leaned forward eagerly.

"Give me the details!"

"I tol' you the song, *Odum Pawkee Mont a Mutting*, was 'kind of a saga.' That was true in a way, but I said it to fool you. There's an old song with the same name, that dates from the early days on Man'aven, but that's in the old languages. W'at I sang was a modern version. It's not a folk song, or a saga, it's a political song. Old Man Pawkey is the Empire, an' the cup of cawfee is peace. 'E climbs a mounting, and 'e wears 'imself out, and 'e fights a 'undred battles, and 'e lets 'is farm go to forest, just to get a cup of cawfee—in- stead of growing the bean in 'is own back yard."

A wave of anger towered and broke over Spangler. When it passed, he found himself standing beside the interrogation table, legs spread and shoulders hunched. There was a stinging pain in the knuckles of his right hand; and there was a dark-red blotch oozing a bright drop on Pembun's lip.

The technician was staring at him, but he looked away when Spangler turned.

"Bring him out of it and then let him go," Spangler said, and strode out of the room.

The screen filled one wall of the chamber, so that the three-dimensional orthocolor image appeared to be physically present beyond a wall of vitrin.

Spangler sat a little to right of center, with Gordon at his left. To his right was Colonel Medoc with his aide; at the far left, sitting a little apart from the others, was Pembun.

Spangler had spoken to Pembun as little as possible since

the interrogation; to be in the same room with him was almost physically distasteful.

On the ancillary screen before Spangler, Keith-Ingram's broad grey face was mirrored. The circuit was not two-way, however; Keith-Ingram was receiving the same tight-beam image that appeared on the big wall screen, and so were several heads of other departments and at least one High Assembly member.

The pictured room did not look like a room at all: it looked almost exactly like the Rithian garden-city Spangler had seen in the indoctrination film. There were the bluish light, the broad-leaved green vines and the serpentine blossoms, with the vague feeling of space beyond; and there, supported by a crotch of the vine, was a Rithian.

The reconstruction was uncannily good, Spangler admitted; if he had not seen the model at close hand, he would have believed the thing to be alive.

But something was subtly off-key; some quality of the light, or configuration of the vine stalks, or perhaps even the attitude of the lifelike Rithian simulacrum. The room as a whole was like a museum diorama convincing only after you had voluntarily taken the first step toward belief.

Medoc was chatting noisily with his aide: his way of minimizing tension, evidently. The aide nodded and coughed nervously. Gordon shifted his position in the heavily-padded seat, and subsided guiltily when Spangler glanced at him.

Keith-Ingram's lips moved soundlessly; he was talking to one of the high executives on another circuit. Then the sound cut in and he said, "All ready at this end, Spangler. Go ahead."

"Right, sir." Distastefully, Spangler turned his head toward Pembun. "Mr. Pembun?"

Pembun spoke quietly into his intercom. A moment later, the vines at the left side of the room parted and Cassina stepped into view.

His face was pale and he looked acutely uncomfortable. Under forced healing techniques he had made a good recovery, but he still looked unwell. He glanced down at the interlaced vines that concealed the true floor, took two steps forward, turned to face the motionless Rithian, and assumed the "at ease" position, hands behind his back. His stiff face eloquently expressed disapproval and discomfort.

No one in the viewing room moved or seemed to breathe. Even the restless Medoc sat statue-still, gazing intently at the screen.

How does Cassina feel, Spangler wondered irrelevantly, with a bomb inside his skull?

Medoc had set his watch to announce seconds. The tiny ticks were distinctly audible.

Three seconds went by, and nothing happened. Presumably, if the buried message in Cassina's brain were triggered by the situation, the buried material would come out verbally, with compulsive force.

Four seconds.

Pembun bent forward over his intercom and murmured. In the room of the image, the Rithian dummy moved slightly; tentacles gripped and relaxed, shifting its weight minutely; the head turned. A high-pitched voice, apparently coming from the dummy, said, "Enter and be at peace."

Six seconds.

The watch ticked once more; then the dummy spoke again, in the sibilants and harsh fricatives of the Rithian language.

Nine seconds. Ten. The dummy spoke once more in Rithian.

Twelve seconds.

The dummy said in Standard, "You will take some refreshment?"

Cassina's expression did not change; his lips remained shut.

Pembun sighed. "It's no use going on," he said. "I'm afraid it's a failure."

"No luck, Chief," said Spangler. "Pembun says that's all he can do."

Keith-Ingram nodded. "Very well. I'll contact you later. Clearing." His screen went blank.

Pembun was speaking into the intercom. A moment later a voice from behind the vines called, "That's all, Colonel." Cassina turned and walked stiffly out. "Clearing," said the voice; and the big screen faded to silvery blankness.

Spangler sat still, savoring his one victory, while the others stood up and moved murmuring toward the door. Vines, he thought mockingly. Dummy monsters. Smells!

When they tried it the next time, it was very different. Cassina lay clipped and swathed in the interrogation harness. His glittering eyes stared at the ceiling in frozen terror.

Spangler, at the bedside, was only partly conscious of the other men in the room and of the avid bank of vision cameras. He watched Cassina as one who marks the oily ripples of the ocean's surface, knowing that fathoms under, a titanic submarine battle is being fought.

In the submerged depths of Cassina's mind, a three-sided struggle had been going on for more than half an hour without a respite. The field of battle centered around a locked and sealed compartment of Cassina's memory. The three combatants were the interrogation machine, the repressive complex which guarded the sealed memory, and Cassina's own desperate will to survive.

The dynamics of the battle were simple and deadly. First, through normal interrogation, Cassina's attention had been directed to the memory-sector in question. The pattern of that avenue of thought was reproduced in the interrogation machine—its jagged outline performed an endless, shuddering dance in the scope—and fed back rhythmically into Cassina's brain, so that his consciousness was redirected, like a compass needle to a magnet, each time it tried to escape. This technique, without the addition of truth drugs or suggestion, was commonly used to recover material suppressed by neurosis or psychic trauma; the interval between surges of current was so timed that stray bits of the buried memory would be forced out by the repressive mechanism itself—each successive return of attention, therefore, found more of the concealed matter exposed, and complete recall could usually be forced in a matter of seconds.

In Cassina's case, the repressive complex was so strong that these ejected fragments of memory were being reabsorbed almost as fast as they were emitted. The repression was survival-linked, meaning to say that the unreasoning, magical nine-tenths of Cassina's mind was utterly convinced that to give up the buried material was to die. Therefore the battle was being fought two against one: the repressive complex, plus the will to survive, against the interrogation machine.

The machine had two aids: the drugs in Cassina's system, and the tireless, pitiless mechanical voice in his ears: "Tell! ... Tell! ... Tell! ... Tell! ..."

And the power of the machine, unlike that of Cassina's mind, was unlimited.

Cassina's lips worked soundlessly for an instant; then his expression froze again.

The technician moved his rheostat over another notch.

Seventy times a second, blasting down Cassina's feeble resistance, the feedback current swung his mind back to a single polarity. Cassina could not even escape into insanity, while that circuit was open; there was no room in his mind for any thought but the one, amplified to a mental scream, that tore through his head with each cycle of the current.

The repression complex and the will to survive were constants; the artificial compulsion to remember was a variable.

Spangler nodded again; up went the power.

XI

CASSINA'S WAXEN face was shiny with sweat, and so contorted that it was no longer recognizable. Abruptly his eyes closed, and the muscles of his face went slack. The technician darted a glance to one of the dials on his control board, and slammed over a lever. Two signal lights began to flash alternately; Cassina's heart, which had stopped, was being artificially controlled.

An attendant gave Cassina an injection. In a few moments his face contorted again, and his eyes blinked open.

The silence in the room was absolute. Spangler waited while long minutes ticked away, then nodded to the technician again. The power went up. Again: another notch.

Without warning, Cassina's eyes screwed themselves shut, his jaws distended, and he spoke: a single, formless stream of syllables.

Then his face froze into an icy, indifferent mask. The signal lights continued to flash until the technician, with a tentative gesture, cut the heart-stimulating current; then the steady ticking of the indicator showed that Cassina's heart was continuing to beat on its own. But his face might have been that of a corpse.

Spangler felt his body relax in a release of tension that was almost painful. His fingers trembled. At his nod, the technician cut his master switch and the attendant began removing the harness from Cassina's head and body.

Spangler glanced once at the small vision screen that

showed Keith-Ingram's intent face, then took the spool the technician handed him, inserted it into the playback in front of him, and ran it through again and again, first at normal speed, then slowed down so that individual words and syllables could be sorted out.

Cassina had shouted, "You will forget what I am about to tell you and will only remember and repeat the message when you see a Rithian and smell this exact odor. If anyone else tries to make you remember, you will die. *Vuyown fowkip tiima yodg pirup* pet shop *vuyown geckyg odowo coyowod, cpgnvib btui tene* book store *ikpyu. Nobcyeu kivpi* . . .

There was much more of it, all in outlandish syllables except that "pet shop" was repeated once more. The others crowded around, careful only not to obstruct Keith-Ingram's view, while Spangler, pointedly ignoring Pembun, turned the spool over to Heissler, the rabbit little Rithian expert who had been flown in early that morning from Denver.

Heissler listened to the spool once more, made hieroglyphic notes, frowned, and cleared his throat. "This is what it says, *roughly*," he began. "I don't want to commit myself to an exact translation until I've had time to study the text *thoroughly*." He glanced around, then looked at his notes.

"On the map we sent you by Kreth Gana you will find a pet shop on a north-south avenue, with a restaurant on one side of it and a book store on the other. The first bomb is at this location. The others will be found as follows: from the first location through the outermost projection of the adjacent coastline—" Heissler paused. "A distance, in Rithian terminology, which is roughly equal to six thousand seven hundred kilometers. I'll work it out exactly in a moment . . . it comes to six seven six eight kilometers, three hundred twenty-nine meters and some odd centimeters—to the second location, which is also a pet shop. From this location, at an interior angle of—let's see, that would be eighty-seven degrees, about eight minutes—yes, eight minutes, six seconds—here's another distance, which works out to . . . ah, nine thousand three hundred seventy-two kilometers, one meter—to the third location. From this location, at an exterior angle of ninety-three degrees, twenty minutes, two seconds . . ."

Spangler had palmed his intercom, got Miss Timoney, and directed her: "Get street maps of all major North American cities and put all the available staff to work on them, starting

with those over five million. They are to look for a pet shop—that's right, a *pet shop*—on a north-south avenue, which has a restaurant on one side of it and a book store on the other. This project is to be set up as temporary but has triple-A priority. In the meantime, rough out a replacement project to cover all inhabited areas in this hemisphere, staff to be adequate to finish the task in not over forty-eight hours—and have the outline on my desk for approval when I come back to the office."

". . . seven thousand nine hundred eighty-one kilometers, ninety-eight meters, to the fifth location. Message ends." Heissler folded his hands and sat back.

Spangler glanced at Keith-Ingram. The grey man nodded. "Good work, Thorne! Keep that project of yours moving, and I'll see to it that similar ones are set up in the other Districts. Congratulations to you all. Clearing." His screen faded.

. . . And that was it, Spangler thought. Undoubtedly there were millions of pet shops in the world which had a restaurant on one side and a book store on the other, and were on north-south avenues; but there couldn't be many pairs of them on a line whose exact length was known, and which passed through the salient point of a coastline adjacent to the first. It was just the sort of mammoth problem with which the Empire was superlatively equipped to deal. Within two days, the bombs would have been found and deactivated.

Curiously, it was not his inevitable promotion which occupied Spangler's mind at that moment, not even the certainty that the Empire's most terrible danger had been averted. He was thinking about Pembun.

In more ways than one, he thought, this is the victory of reason over sentiment, science over witchcraft. *This is the historic triumph of the single meaning.*

He glanced at Pembun, still sitting by himself at the end of the room. The little man's face was grey under the brown. He was hunched over, staring at nothing.

Spangler watched him, feeling the void inside himself where triumph should have been. It was always like this, after he had won. So long as the fight lasted, Spangler was a vessel of hatred; when it was over, when his emotions had done their work, they flowed out of him and left him at peace. Sometimes it was difficult to remember how he could have thought the defeated enemy so important, how he could have

burned with impotent rage at the very existence of a man so small, so shriveled, so obviously harmless. Sometimes, as now, Spangler felt the intrusive touch of compassion.

It's how we're made, he thought. The next objective is always the important thing the only thing that exists for us . . . and then, when we've reached it, we wonder why it was so necessary, and sometimes we don't know quite what to do with it. But there's always something else to fight for. It may be childish, but it's the thing that makes us great.

Pembun stood up slowly and walked over to Colonel Medoc who was talking ebulliently to Gordon. Spangler saw Medoc turn and listen to something Pembun was saying; then his brows arched roguishly and he shook his head, putting a finger to his pursed lips. Pembun spoke again, and Medoc grinned hugely, leaned over and whispered something into Pembun's ear, then shouted with laughter.

Pembun walked out of the room, glancing at Spangler as he passed. His face was still grey, but there was a faint, twisted smile on his lips.

He's made a joke, Spangler thought. Give him credit for courage.

He felt suddenly listless, as he had been after the scene with Joanna. He moved toward the door, but a sudden tingling of uneasiness made him hesitate. He turned after a moment and walked over to Medoc.

"Pardon my curiosity, Colonel," he said. "What was it that Pembun said to you just now?"

Medoc's eyes glistened. "He was very droll. He asked me if I knew any French, and I said yes—I spoke it as a boy, you know; my family summered in a very backward, very picturesque area. Well, then he asked me if it was not true that in French, 'pet shop' would have an entirely different meaning than in Standard." He snickered.

"And you told him—?" Spangler prompted.

Medoc made one of his extravagant gestures. "I said yes! That is, if you take the first word to be French, and the second to be Standard, then a pet shop would be—" he lowered his voice to a dramatic undertone—"a shop that sold impolite noises."

He laughed immoderately, shaking his head. "What a thing to think of!"

Spangler smiled wryly. "Thank you, Colonel," he said, and

walked out. That touch of uneasiness had been merely a hangover, he thought; it was no longer necessary to worry about anything that Pembun said, or thought, or did.

Pembun was waiting for him in his outer office.

Spangler looked at him without surprise, and crossed the room to sit beside him. "Yes, Mr. Pembun?" he said simply.

"I 'ave something to tell you," said Pembun, "that you won't like to 'ear. Per'aps we'd better go inside."

"All right," said Spangler, and led the way.

He found himself walking along a deserted corridor somewhere on the recreation level. On one side, the doorways he passed beckoned him with stereos of the tri-D's to be experienced inside—a polar expedition on Nereus VI, an evening with Ayesha O'Shaughnessy, a nightmare, a pantomime, a ballet, a battle in space. On the other, he glimpsed the pale, crystalline shells of empty dream capsules.

He did not know how long he had been walking. He had boarded a scooter, he remembered, but he did not know which direction he had taken, or how long he had ridden, or where he had got off. His feet ached, so he must have been walking quite a long time.

He glanced upward. The ceiling of the corridor was stereo-celled, and the view that was turned on now was that of the night sky: a clear, cold night, by the look of it: a sky of deep jet, each star as brilliant and sharp as a kernel of ice.

Pembun's grey-brown face stared back at him from the sky. He had been watching that face ever since he had left his office; he had seen it against the satin-polished walls of corridors; it was there when he closed his eyes; but it looked singularly appropriate against this background. The stars have Pembun's face, he thought.

A bone-deep shudder passed through his body. He turned aside and went into one of the dream rooms, and sat down on the robing bench.

The door closed obsequiously behind him.

He looked down into the open capsule, softly padded and just big enough for a man to lie snugly; he dented its midnight-blue lining with his finger. The crystal curve of the top was like ice carved paper-thin; the gas vents were lipped by circlets of rose-tinted metal, antiseptically bright.

No, he thought. At least, not yet. I've got to think. Now of all times, I've got to think.

A pun, a pun, a beastly, moronic pun. . . .

Pembun had said, "I've made a bad mistake, Commissioner. You remember me asking w'y Colonel Cassina tried so 'ard to get to the Rithch w'en 'e saw we'd found 'im out?"

And Spangler, puzzled, uneasy: "I remember."

"An' I answered myself, that Cassina mus' 'ave been ordered to do it so 'e could be killed—becawse of the message in 'is brain that the Rithch wouldn' want us to find."

"You were right, Mr. Pembun."

"No, I was wrong. I ought to 'ave seen it. We know that the Rithch's post-'ypnotic control over Cassina was strong enough to make 'im try to commit suicide; 'e almost succeeded later on, even though we 'ad 'im under close surveillance and were ready for it. So it wouldn' 'ave made any sense for the Rithch to order 'im to come and be killed. If Cassina 'ad tried to kill 'imself, right then, the minute you came into the office, there isn't any doubt that 'e would 'ave been able to do it. You never could 'ave stopped 'im in time."

Spangler's brain had clung to that unanswerable syllogism, and gone around and around with it, and come out nowhere. "What are you getting at?"

"Don't you see, "Commissioner? W'at the Rithch rilly wanted was w'at actually 'appened. 'E wanted us to kill 'im—becawse it was in 'is brain, not in Cassina's, that the rilly dangerous information was."

Pembun had paused. Then: "They love life. 'E couldn' bring 'imself to do it, but 'e could arrange it so that we'd 'ave to kill 'im, not take 'im alive."

And Spangler, hoarsely: "Are you saying that that message we got from Cassina was a fraud?"

"No. It might be, but I don't think so. I think the Rithch left the genuine message in Cassina's mind, all right, for a joke—and becawse 'e knew that even if we found it, it wouldn' do us any good."

Spangler had hardly recognized his own voice. "I don't understand you. What are you trying to—what do you mean?"

No triumph in Pembun's voice, only weariness and regret: "I told you you wouldn' like it, Commissioner. Did you notice there were two Standard phrases in that message?"

"Pet shop and book store. Well?"

"You can say the same things in Rochtik—*brutu ka* and *lessi ka*. They're exact translations; there wouldn' 'ave been any danger of confusion at awl."

Spangler had stared at him, silently, for a long moment. Inside him, he had felt as if the solid earth had fallen away beneath him, all but a slender pinnacle on which he sat perched; as if he had to be very careful not to make any sudden motion, lest he slip and tumble down the precipice topped by the pinnacle.

"Did you know," he asked brittlely, "that I would ask Colonel Medoc what you had said to him?"

Pembun nodded slowly. "I thought you might. I thought per'aps it would prepare you, a little. This isn' easy to take."

"What are you waiting for?" Spangler had managed. "Tell me the rest."

"Awl right. . . . *Pet* 'appens to be a sound that's used in a good many yuman languages. In Late Terran French it 'as an impolite meaning. But in Twalaz, w'ich is derived from French, it means 'treasure,' and a pet shop would be w'at you cawl in Standard a jewelry store.

"Then there's Kah-rin, w'ich is the trade language in the Goren system and some others. In Kah-rin, *pet* means a toupee. And as for 'book store,' *book* means 'machine' in Yes-suese, 'carpet' in Elda, 'toy' in Balaut—and *bukstor* means 'public urinal' in Perroschi. Those are just a few that I 'appen to know; there's prob'ly a 'undred others that I never 'eard of.

"Prob'ly the Rithi agreed on w'at language or dialect to use before they came 'ere. It's the kind of thing that would amuse them . . . I'm sorry. I told you they liked puns, Commissioner . . . and you know that Earth is the only yuman planet w'ere the language 'asn't evoled to speak of in the last four 'undred years."

Now he understood why Pembun's face was grey: not because Spangler had defeated him in a contest of wills—but because the Empire had had its death-blow.

The Rithians had planned their joke well; they had left a clear message for their enemies, saying, "Here are the bombs"—but the message could never be read.

Now Earth's campaign against the Rithians would stop. There would be no check to that alien growth; wherever Man turned, he would find the friendly, pleasure-loving, humorous Rithians. . . . And if other alien empires rose, might not the Rithians send word to say with authority, "Leave our friends alone, too"?

. . . So that somehow, without quite knowing how it had happened, Earth would find that the crest of the wave had passed it by; that it was settling into the trough of history.

XII

NIGHT UPON NIGHT, deep after endless deep; distance without perspective, relation without order: the universe without the Empire.

One candle, that they had thought would burn forever, now snuffed out and smoking thinly in the darkness.

Another deep shudder racked Spangler's body. Blindly, he crawled into the capsule and closed it over him.

After a long time, he opened his eyes and saw two blurred faces above him. The light hurt his eyes. He blinked until he could see them clearly: one was Pembun and the other was Joanna.

"'Ow long 'as 'e been in there?" Pembun's voice said.

"I don't know, there must be something wrong with the machine. The dials aren't registering at all." Joanna's voice, but sounding as he had never heard it before. "If the shutoff didn't work—"

"Better cawl a doctor."

"Yes." Joanna's head turned aside and vanished.

"Wait," Spangler said thickly. He struggled to sit up.

Joanna's face reappeared, and both of them stared in at him, as if he were a specimen that had astonishingly come to life. It made Spangler want to laugh.

"Security," he said. "Security has two meanings. I was living a pun, and didn't know it. What do you think of that?"

Joanna choked and turned away. After a moment Spangler realized that she was crying. He shook his head violently to clear it and started to climb out of the capsule. Pembun put a hand on his arm.

"Can you 'ear me, Thorne?" he said anxiously. "Do you understand w'at I'm saying?"

"I'm all right," said Spangler, standing up. "Joanna, what's the matter with you?"

She turned. "You're not—"

"I'm all right. I was tired, and I crawled in there to rest. I stayed there, thinking, for an hour or so. Then I must have fallen asleep."

She took one step and was pressed tight against him, her cheek against his throat, her arms clutching him fiercely.

"You were gone six hours," Pembun said. "I got Miss Planter's name from your emergency listing, and we've been looking for you ever since. I shouldn't have jumped to conclusions, I guess." He turned to go.

"Wait," said Spangler again. He felt weak, but very clear and confident. He had done a lot of thinking, before he fell asleep. There had been time to recast his whole life, to turn it and look at it from new angles, to see meanings that had been hidden from him before. He knew the answer to Pembun, now.

Joanna pulled away from him abruptly and began hunting for a tissue. Spangler got one out of his pouch and handed it to her.

"Thanks," she said in a small voice, and sat down on the bench.

"This is for you, too, Joanna," said Spangler soberly. "Part of it." He turned to Pembun.

"You were wrong," he said clearly.

Pembun's face slowly took on a resigned expression. "'Ow?"

"You told me, under interrogation, that your only reason for working with the Empire, against its rivals, was that the Empire was necessary to the Outworlds—that if it broke up too soon, the Outworlds would either fall with it, or else become as 'ossified' as the Empire itself, which would be equally bad."

"If you say so, I'll take your word for it, Commissioner."

"You said it. Do you deny it now?"

"No."

"You were wrong. You've given your life to work that must have been distasteful to you, every minute of it." He drew a deep breath. "I can't imagine why, unless you were reasoning on the basis of two assumptions that any twenty-first-century schoolboy could have disproved—that like causes invariably produce like results, and that the end justifies the means."

Pembun's expression had changed from boredom to surprise, to shock, to incredulous surmise. Now he looked at Spangler as if he had never seen him before.

"Go awn," he said softly.

"Instead of staying on Manhaven, where you belonged, you've been bumbling around the Empire, trying to hold together a structure that needed only one push in the right place to bring it down. . . . You've been as wrong as I have. Both of us have been wasting our lives.

"Now see what's happened! Earth is finished as a major power. The Empire is dead this minute, though it may not begin to stink for another century. The Outworlds have *got* to stand alone. If like measures produce like ends, then that's the way it will be, whether you like it or not—but history never repeats itself, Pembun."

"Jawj," said the little man.

"Jawj . . . Incidentally, I know you dislike apologies—"

"You don't owe me any," said Pembun. They smiled at each other for a moment; then Spangler thrust out his hand and Pembun took it.

"Thorne, what are you going to do?" Joanna asked.

He looked at her.

"Resign tomorrow, get a visa as soon as I can, and ship out. If I can find a place that will take me."

"There's a place for you on Man'aven," said Pembun. "If there isn't, we'll make one."

Joanna looked from one to the other, and said nothing.

"Jawj," said Spangler, "wait for us outside a few minutes, will you?"

The little man smiled happily, sketched a bow, and walked out. His voice floated back:

"I'll be with Miss O'Shaughnessy w'en you want me."

Spangler sat down beside Joanna. She looked at him with an expression in which bewilderment and pain were mingled with something else, harder to define.

"Miss O'Shaughnessy?" she asked tentatively.

"One of the tri-D's across the corridor. I wonder if he has any idea of what he's getting into." He paused. It had been easy, with Pembun; nothing had ever been easier to say. This was harder.

"I have something else to tell you, Joanna," he began.

"Thorne, if it's an apology—"

"It isn't. If Pembun told you anything about the last few days, then perhaps you know part of the reason for—what I did."

"Yes."

"But that's nothing. I may beat you again; I doubt if I'll ever apologize for it. What I have to tell you is that I made up my mind to marry you, three months ago . . . not because you're Joanna . . . but because you're a Planter."

"I knew that."

Spangler stared at her.

"You what?"

"Why else do you think I wouldn't?" she demanded, meeting his gaze.

Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes glittering with the last tears. The aloof, icy mask was gone. She looked, Spangler discovered, nothing whatever like a statue of Aristocracy.

His throat ached, and the words came out harshly. "Will you come with me?"

She looked at her hands. "If I were to say no, would you go without me?"

". . . Yes," said Spangler. "I've got a lot to do, and a lot to make up for. Thirty years. I can't do it here."

Her eyes met his again, and he felt her fingers touch him lightly. "In that case," she said thoughtfully, "you'll have to persuade me, won't you? It may take a long time."

Spangler gripped her arms. "The trip to Manhaven takes five weeks, I believe. We could make a good beginning then."

"Yes," said Joanna, "we could."

SON OF TWO WORLDS

Edmond Hamilton

THE FIVE YOUNG men who were cautiously closing in toward the low-lying cliff of desert-mirroring granite had no premonition of approaching tragedy.

"*Ni kóru! aol!*" Their leader called softly in Martian. "Go quietly now! At any moment the beast may make a rush."

He was the oldest member of the small hunting and scouting expedition. His name was Oul Vorn and he was a typical young Martian of the southern desert clans. He was six feet two in height and proportionately broad of shoulder. He wore the usual jacket and breeches and sandals of soft black and sand-cat leather, and his crimson-skinned head was helmeted. As he advanced toward the cliff his dark eyes glowed with excitement and his stride was cautious but assured.

The five youthful hunters had been advancing in a semi-circle, and were now quite close to the mouth of a darkly-shadowed cave. Each carried a sword-like weapon strapped to his waist, and was holding in readiness a noose of strong, flexible wire, hand-poised for instant hurling.

The rocky precipice loomed a hundred feet high directly in their path. At their backs, rolling red sand dunes stretched northward to the near horizon. The brassy glare of late afternoon sunlight scarcely seemed to temper the nipping chill of the thin, sharp air.

"The beast will come out in a moment," said Oul Vorn without turning his head. "Keep your wits, all of you, the instant he emerges."

The young man beside Oul Vorn spoke in a level impatient whisper. "I can go in there and stir him up. We're being far too cautious."

"No, Ark Avul," said Oul Vorn with sharp insistence. "We'll wait until he emerges. No sense in taking unnecessary risks."

Ark Avul bore little resemblance to his companions. He was clad similarly, but no one with more than a child's discernment would have mistaken him for a Martian. He was obviously an Earthman.

Stephen Drew—for that was Ark Avul's real name on Terra—was as tall as the others. But he lacked their red complexion, bulging chests, and long, straight, bony legs. His dark hair, clear gray eyes and eager, sensitive face proclaimed his terrestrial heritage.

His heart was thudding with excitement now as he and the others stood in a crescent around the cave-mouth. They had hunted rock-dragons before, but this one was the largest yet, and was known to be vicious-tempered and formidable.

"*Yal lur abak!*" Drew whispered warningly. "I hear him coming."

There was a sudden scrambling sound. Then with a single bound the rock-dragon leaped out of the cave, and faced them, hissing and rearing. The beast, a truly terrifying representative of the largest species of carnivorous lizard on Mars, reared its barrel-shaped, leathery body nine feet high. Its small head weaved malignly from side to side on its reptilian neck, and it glared down appraisingly at the hunters as though in search of a victim to seize and rend with its razor-sharp talons.

"Now!" breathed Oul Vorn. "All together! And watch yourselves!"

Stephen Drew was the first to act. He hurled a thought at the rearing rock-dragon, as powerfully as he could.

This was Martian hunting at its most perilous and exciting. It was hunting by hypnotism. On Earth there were huge pythons and anacondas which could conquer a prey by hypnotism, and that same deadly faculty had been developed by evolutionary mutation to a far greater degree in every Martian animal. Rock-dragons trapped sand-cats by hypnosis, and sand-cats in turn caught small rodents and moon-owls by direct and merciless hypnotic attack.

At first the rearing rock-dragon resisted the hypnotic as-

sault of the five hunters with all of its faculties. The beast could probably have successfully opposed one, or even two of them. But the combined attack so distracted it that it was unable to concentrate.

"Relax! Sleep!" vibrated the mental command in Stephen Drew's mind, remorseless in its urgency.

The Earthman had developed his hypnotic hunting technique until he was almost as proficient as his Martian companions. He had practiced the technique since childhood, for he had been born here in southern Mars. Presently the rock-dragon's gray head started sagging, and its red eyes blinked shut. Its massive, leathery body settled slowly to the sand. The combined hypnotic assault had succeeded more rapidly than was usually the case.

The five tight-lipped hunters advanced to within a few feet of the beast, their nooses and swords raised in cautious readiness.

"Sleep—sleep—" thought Drew relentlessly—over and over.

Then came a disastrous interruption. From the desert behind them echoed a distant, shrill voice. "Ark Avul! Your father needs you! Avul Kan sends for you!"

Stephen Drew half-turned, momentarily forgetful of his peril. The shouted interruption had momentarily broken his concentration, and weakened the linked hypnotic attack of the entire hunting band.

The rock-dragon, temporarily freed from the attack's initial vigor, uncoiled its full length, reared up again, and charged. Drew realized instantly that the others could not hope to regain full, effective control in time.

"*Da rikao!* Rush him!" he shouted, plunging forward.

He hurled his noose expertly at the charging beast. The whirling loop caught and tangled the rock-dragon's striking talons. Drew dived under them, and plunged his heavy sword savagely home through the leathery hide, directly above the spot where one of the creature's two hearts pulsed.

Dark blood spouted, and the beast turned on him with a roar of rage and physical torment. Then the monstrous creature froze, collapsing gently back onto the sand. The thrust had reached its other heart, and almost instantly inflicted a mortal wound.

"That was close!" Stephen Drew said, rising shakily to his feet. "You're not hurt, Oul?"

"I'm quite all right," said Vorn, speaking with the curious measured formality which was characteristic of his race even under stress.

"It was my fault that the attack wavered and failed," Drew said gravely. "Someone called me and I lost control."

"It's your father's servant—Lin L'Lan," one of the Martians said. "Here he comes."

A "leaper"—the universal beast of burden of the southern clans—was advancing rapidly toward them. The front legs of the furry brown animal were thin and short, but its hind legs were truly massive appendages on which it shot forward in prodigious bounds. In the saddle on its back sat Lin L'Lan.

The old Martian's extreme age was proclaimed by the network of fine wrinkles which had turned his crimson face into a withered mask. His solemn black eyes were bleak and almost expressionless as he dismounted beside Drew.

"Avul Kan sends for you," he said rapidly in Martian. "He has been grievously stricken."

"My father ill?" Drew exclaimed, with sharp alarm in his voice.

"Yes, Ark Avul," replied the old servant gravely. "He collapsed while in the lower tunnels of the mine. We carried him into the house. He could not move. He bade me hasten and bring you to him."

Without a word, Stephen Drew turned and raced toward the five leapers which were tethered some distance along the cliff. He unhitched his own steed and sprang into the saddle.

"We ride fast, Lin L'Lan!" he called, and touched his heel to the leaper's side. "*Tako!*"

The furry body under him sank as though upon springs, then sailed out across the sunlit sand in a long, smooth-flying leap. It alighted as though upon shock-absorbing coils bunched down, and again flew forward smoothly.

Old Lin L'Lan rode beside Drew. The old Martian made no comment, for speech to a Martian was not a thing to be used without need.

The small, brilliant sun was sinking toward the north-western rim of the rolling desert, and a cold wind was blowing steadily from the east. Drew knew that it was the first icy breath of the night wind, sweeping in from the side of Mars which was already shadowed.

Ghostly whirls of sand danced and glided past like wan-

dering genii of the wastes as the two hurrying riders topped a ridge, and paused for an instant. Ahead of them, a long dark belt stretched from northeast to southwest across the red desert. It was one of the ancient canals, dismal-looking in the fading light. Dusty, spiked shrubs of dark green kian trees guarded its sides, rising sheer from the dusky-green water-grass that lined its sloping banks.

Drew and Lin L'Lan turned northwest when they reached the canal. The leapers knew the way home, and they moved now with accelerated speed along the old canal, whose crumbling stone bed channeled the sluggish equator-bound water from the distant polar ice caps.

"Krah!" muttered Lin L'Lan. "See The workers have heard the news and have gathered to give you support and comfort."

Stephen Drew's lips tightened, and a cold foreboding came upon him. He spurred his mount almost savagely.

Ahead, near the green canal vegetation, rose the metal buildings of the Drew Tranium Mine. Over in the desert beyond the refining and smelting plants lay the shallow quarries. But the Martian laborers had abandoned their work, and were now gathering in a silent throng outside the metal-loid bungalow adjacent to the mine.

The red men parted sympathetically as Stephen Drew and Lin L'Lan rode up. In tight-lipped silence Drew descended from his leaper and strode through the solemn throng into his home. In the rear bedroom, a western window let in a shaft of level red sunlight which sharply illuminated his father's wan, haggard face.

Stephen Drew's heart stood still. Jesse Drew in his bed was a pathetic sight. Once hale, hearty and ruddy-faced, the old man was now so altered by illness that he seemed a stranger to his own son.

"*Kwis ilo, niva?*" Drew spoke gently, bending over the bed. "What happened, Father?"

Jesse Drew's gray eyes had a glazed, tormented look. His lips moved with difficulty.

"Speak—speak English, Stephen."

"I forgot, Father," said Drew. He spoke the Earth language with a slurred accent, hesitating awkwardly over the words. "You're going to be all right. I'll hurry to Syrtis and get a capable, experienced doctor!"

The old man's filmed eyes lingered on his son's tanned,

anxious face with fondness. "No use, Stephen," he whispered. "I'm going fast. It's my heart. I've simply led too strenuous a life. The penalty for spending twenty years on Mars."

Jesse seemed to be measuring with pride his son's tall, straight figure, lithe in the black leather garments. "You'll never get 'gravitation-heart,' Stephen," he murmured. "You're more Martian than Earthman. And that's what troubles me."

"Let's not talk about it now, Father," said Stephen Drew earnestly. "I've been happy here ever since I can remember."

"Yes—because you've never known any other way of life," muttered the old man. "You're an Earthman who's never been on Earth! I should have sent you to Earth years ago—to be educated. I promised your mother I would, when she lay dying in this very room nineteen years ago. And I didn't keep my promise. I let you grow up wild here with Martians. Now you talk Martian, think like a Martian."

"But I've been happy here, Father," insisted Stephen Drew. "I'm satisfied to be a Martian."

"I know, son," whispered the old man. "These Martians are a fine people. Most Earth people don't understand that under their forbidding exterior, they're loyal, and warmly human—generous-minded to a fault. I've always respected them—and I've never oppressed or cheated them as other Earthmen have done. I've given them a fair share of our tranium-mine. And yet—I can't quite forgive them for making you so completely one of them—since the day you were born in this house."

"You see—" Jesse Drew's fading eyes looked out at the flaring sunset desert—"you should have gone to Earth, Stephen. It's your parent world, after all, the world from which I and your mother came. I should have sent you there. But I was selfish, and wanted you with me."

Stephen Drew had a hard lump in his throat, but his voice was quiet. "You are not selfish, Father."

The old man did not seem to hear him. "Now it's too late," he muttered. "You've grown up—an Earthman in appearance and ancestry, but a Martian in everything else. And when you go to Earth, you'll be a stranger on your own world!"

"I don't want to go to Earth at all! I want to stay here with you and my Martian friends—my people!"

"Stephen, you have to go to Earth," his father told him earnestly. "I had intended to go, very soon, and take you with me. But I'll be dead—"

Stephen Drew made an agonized gesture of denial, but his father continued resolutely, "When I'm gone you'll inherit the tranium mining concession. But it may be taken from you, unless you go to Earth to defend the title at law."

Stephen stared in bewilderment. "I don't understand."

"Read this tele-audio message," whispered the older man, touching a slip of paper on the bed. "It came from Earth today."

"Serious danger of your concession being revoked," read Stephen. "Imperative you come here immediately. Gilson."

Stephen Drew looked up perplexedly. "What does it mean?" he asked.

His father looked at him steadily for a moment before replying. "As you know, all of the tranium mined here on Mars is shipped back to Earth, because it's a vital element used by the transmutation companies in producing synthetic foods for an overcrowded Planet. Walter Gilson is my New York agent. He sells the tranium I ship to the big companies directly, never profiteering, demanding only an honest price."

"But what does he mean by a danger of our concession being revoked?" Stephen asked.

"Politics," answered his father in a bitter whisper. "Tranium is precious. There are plenty of ruthless, scheming men who would like to get their hands on the mining concession I've held for twenty years. If they can exert pressure on the System Government to revoke the concession, they'll take it over themselves in short order."

"But there's no reason for revoking the concession!" Stephen protested. "We've complied with all the Government's regulations."

"Yes, but greed is powerful," the old man reminded him. "If self-seeking mining interests prevail on the Government to revoke our concession you know what will happen."

Stephen Drew's gray eyes widened in alarm. "If they succeed in taking over here all of my people will be working for strange Earthmen. The new owners would brutally ex-

plot them, as they do almost everywhere else on Mars?"

"That's precisely what I'm afraid of," admitted his father. "That's why the concession *must not* be revoked, Stephen. But we can't stop it on Mars. Earth is the only place where anything can be done. And I can't go myself now. I'd never survive the trip." There was a desperate pleading in his eyes. "Promise me you'll go to Terra, and fight as I would fight to prevent the concession from being revoked. Remember what it would mean to all our Martian friends if the mine passes into unscrupulous hands!"

"All right," Stephen Drew promised. "I'll go. And I won't let myself forget that it's far more than just a property struggle."

"I know you won't, Stephen," muttered Jesse Drew. His pale face was troubled. "But I wish you knew more about Earth and Earthmen—" His voice trailed off. He sank back, closing his eyes.

Stephen sprang forward, his face tight with alarm.

"Avul Kan sleeps," whispered Lin L'Lan.

It was true. Jesse Drew, exhausted by his effort to talk, had fallen into a deep slumber. Stephen went slowly out of the room, and crossed a narrow hallway to the low veranda of the house.

For a long moment he stood there motionless, staring up at the sky. The night wind moaned across the moon-dim desert, and the thin, faraway fluting of a pimul bird was answered by the shrill squall of a sand-cat. In the spangled heavens, Drew's eyes picked out the green spark of Earth.

"Ark Avul!" spoke L'Lan suddenly. "The Just One is passing."

There had been no sound from within the house, the old Martian servant needed neither sight nor sound to foretell the coming of death. Stephen returned into the house and snapped on the light of his father's bedroom.

Jesse Drew was sitting erect. His lips moved and he gestured feebly when he saw his son, as if in farewell. Then his body sagged and his head fell forward on his chest.

"*Ni vuru Avul Kan!*" came in a low cry from the crowd of Martians outside. Seemingly, they had telepathically sensed the tragedy and were overwhelmed with grief. "The Just One is dead!"

Stephen bowed his head. He was remembering many things. His father's cheerful spirits as they had gone sand-

cat hunting on a bright, windless morning years ago. His father taking him over the desert waste to Syrtis and chuckling at his boyish delight in the old Martian town. His father—

He felt a hot stinging behind his eyes. He wanted to weep, but could not. The Martian training was too deeply ingrained in him—the iron-clad custom of concealing all strong emotion. He turned abruptly and went out.

"The Just One is dead and now the Son of the Just One is master," intoned a deep voice from the Martian throng. "*Ark Avul ir kal ni.*"

The trust in that voice was absolute and Stephen Drew felt a crushing weight of new responsibility as he looked up at the night sky. Earth seemed immeasurably far away across the spatial gulf. Another world—a strange, completely different world from familiar Mars. And he must go there, to fight a battle he could not be sure of winning.

II

"COMING IN to Earth!" The call came loudly and urgently through the announcer-amplifiers of the big spaceliner. "All passengers please take their space-chairs!"

There was an excited stir among the passengers. Most of them had been crowding along the glassite wall of the promenade deck of the *Pallas*, roughly jostling one another to get a better view of Earth. The planet bulked very large in the star-dotted vault of space.

Nearly all the passengers were tourists, promoters, engineers and officials returning first-class from Mars. They were a lively, high-spirited crowd, clad in bright synthesilk trousers and jackets of many colors. They chattered with great animation as they seated themselves in the recoil-mounted space-chairs along the decks.

Two quieter figures stood out in striking contrast. One was a tall young man wearing a dark synthesilk suit hopelessly out of fashion. The other was a forbidding-looking old Martian garbed in the black leather of the southern desert Mars clans.

"There will be a severe jolt—a genuine shaking up—when we land, Lin L'Lan," said Stephen Drew as they approached their chairs. "Do you feel all right?"

The old Martian servant grunted scornfully. "Do you think me as soft at these chattering dolls, Ark Avul?"

"Still I wish you hadn't insisted so strenuously on coming along. Everything will be different on Earth, quite different. You may not like any part of it."

"Your father put you in my care when you were born, Ark Avul. It was my duty to accompany you and look after you."

The keel rocket-jets of the *Pallas* let go with a roar that discouraged further conversation. Already the great ship was dropping down past the silvery, lifeless sphere of the Moon.

Stephen Drew felt peculiarly apprehensive. The strange world toward which they were falling—this legendary homeland from which his parents had come—what exactly would it be like?

"Entering atmosphere!" announced the amplifiers along the deck. "Twenty minutes to New York Spaceport."

"Boy, will I be glad to see New York again!" exclaimed the stout Earthman in the chair next to Drew. "No more Mars for me! Spent four whole days there. Four days—in that god-awful desert village they call Syrtis! I never went out of my Earth-conditioned room."

Drew made no reply. Why did these Earth people seem so blind to the beauty of his bright, wind-scoured desert world? Was there not beauty in vast open spaces, in scenic grandeur, in solitude under the stars?

The brake-blasts were roaring continuously now and the thin screech of parting atmosphere was rising to a shriek.

Drew's temples were pounding tumultuously. He glimpsed, through glassite deckwall, a faraway vista of gleaming, fairy-like structures of immense dimensions which stretched southward for miles in a wavering curve. There was a prolonged and almost deafening roar of rockets, a protesting creaking of the liner's frame, and finally a jarring bump.

"New York Spaceport!" announced the amplifiers.

Stephen Drew shook his throbbing head to clear it, and hastily unbuckled the strap across his waist. Presently he and Lin L'Lan were moving with a throng of eagerly noisy passengers toward the space-door on the lower deck.

On both sides of them passengers were boisterously exchanging greetings with friends who had come to meet them. Drew stumbled down the gangway, and stood with Lin L'Lan in the midst of the crowd, dazed, and bewildered by the deafening clamor.

"Rocket-cab!" yelled a uniformed Earthman to him. "Rocket-cab down to the city?"

Stephen Drew felt physically ill. The air he inhaled seemed hot, heavy and steamy—different from the thin dry desert atmosphere of Mars. It was laden with damp scents of strange vegetation and it hurt his lungs.

His body felt oddly weighted down, and his movements were awkward. He hadn't expected that the increased gravitation would be so distressing. Even the ship, in which the atmosphere and artificial gravitation had been scientifically "averaged" between Mars and Earth, had not prepared him for so startling a development.

Lin L'Lan swayed, and Drew anxiously steadied him. "L'Lan, are you all right?" he asked, solicitously.

"*Sao, Ark Avul,*" the old Martian managed to reply. "But this air is too heavy to breathe. And it is too hot."

Drew nodded concernedly. "My father's agent Gilson was to meet us. But how can we find him in this terrible crowd?"

"These people are noisy as canal apes."

Hurrying passengers and porters jostled them at five second intervals. To Drew, it seemed that everyone was hastening from the landing platform on a life-or-death mission. And the clamor of shouting voices was deafening to his ears. Earth's thick atmosphere carried sounds with appalling loudness.

He was perspiring in the steamy warmth, and when he looked up at the Sun it seemed incredibly huge. It's heat was muggy and torrid to Drew and his distressed companion, yet none of the people around them seemed to mind it.

A hand descended on Drew's shoulder. It belonged to a chubby, pink-faced Earthman in the prime of life, his blue eyes beaming behind owlish spectacles. He wore a brilliant, sky-blue synthesilk suit.

"You're young Drew!" he exclaimed excitedly. "I knew it the instant I saw this old Martian following you down the gangway. I'm Gilson—Walter Gilson—your father's agent

for eight years. Your agent now. And a good one, if I do say it myself."

Drew bowed in the formal Martian fashion. He murmured the usual greeting in hesitant English. "May the two moons favor you."

"What's that?" said Gilson, frowning. "Oh, Martian stuff, huh? How come you brought this old chap along with you?"

"Lin L'Lan is my friend," Drew said with sharp reproach in his voice.

"Oh sure, sure," Gilson plunged on hastily. He pumped the old Martian's hand, to Lin L'Lan's instant and intense dislike. Then he swung back to Stephen Drew. "You've got to come down to my office with me. I'll show you just how this concession business stands. Got all my charts and figures there."

Bewilderedly, Drew let the chubby, talkative Earthman hustle himself and Lin L'Lan through the noisy throng. Drew still felt shaken and ill at ease. The heavy air made breathing difficult and it cost him an effort to move at all.

The whole scene was utterly confusing to him. The noisy crowds, the unfamiliar big Sun glowering hotly down from the soft blue sky. And Walter Gilson hurried, like all these other people, as though in a panic lest one precious moment be lost.

"Rocket-cab!" yelled Gilson as they reached the broad avenue bordering the spaceport. "Here, you!"

A torpedo-shaped car glided up to them. "Just get inside," said Gilson. "We've got to hurry." Drew and Lin L'Lan stumbled into the vehicle's cramped interior and the talkative Earthman gave the driver his address.

Next moment, Drew was flung back against the cushions by the speed of their start. The car hummed southward along a broad gleaming highway of white synthestone toward New York's towers. The buildings were truncated, terraced pyramids of transparent steel, their glass-like walls flashing in the sunlight. Some walls were "blanked" for privacy, but through others Drew saw mazes of rooms.

"Looks pretty big to you after Mars, I bet," chuckled Walter Gilson. "Sixty million people live right in the New York area."

"My father always told me that Earth was badly overcrowded," Stephen Drew remarked in his slurred, hesitant English.

"Overcrowded?" Gilson said. "Oh sure, Earth is pretty well filled with people these days. No more wars to keep population down. In fact, most of Earth is built up like this. We couldn't feed ten billion people if it weren't for the synthetic foods made by the big transmutation companies."

He leaned forward and tapped Stephen Drew's knee earnestly. "And that's where your tranium concession comes in, Drew. Tranium's the vital catalyst. Without it, it would be impossible to transmute seawater elements into synthetic foods. And right now there's a big fight going on between the two largest transmutation companies—Transmutation, Incorporated, and Synthesubstances."

Gilson's pink face was serious. "Synthesubstances is trying to strangle Transmutation and the other companies. Burdine, of Synthesubstances is trying to seize absolute control by getting a monopoly on tranium. He wants to sew up your tranium mines, too. If he can't do it any other way, he'll get the Government to revoke your concession and award it to a puppet of his."

"I can't understand it. Why would the Government do anything to help such a man gain a monopoly on synthetic foods?"

Walter Gilson shrugged his plump shoulders. "Government will do anything that influence can make it do. And Burdine's got plenty of influence. Fortunately I've got a plan worked out to spoil his little game. I figure, that—"

"*Krah, L'Lan!*" cried Stephen Drew in sudden excitement, pointing eastward through the window. "Look—over there! Water!"

Far eastward through the gap between two towering buildings, Drew had glimpsed a blue, ripple-streaked plain that stretched off in a level expanse to the skyline.

"Water—an infinity of it!" Drew explained to the astounded old Martian. "They call it an ocean."

"Truly, I had not thought there was so much water in the Universe," muttered the old man in Martian, his solemn black eyes incredulous.

"Oh, it's the ocean you see," said Walter Gilson. "You'll have to go out to the Submarine Club sometime and *really* see it." He looked curiously at Drew. "Odd, for a young Earthman to be seeing Earth for the first time. Like it?"

"It's exciting. But everything is so—so different."

They were passing a park. To Drew's eyes, the grass and

vegetation seemed a shriekingly brilliant green, almost blinding in its brightness. The trees looked enormous, and the flowers were a riot of blazing colors. It was all so different from the dusty spiked trees and thorny shrubs along the Martian canals.

The rocket-car was gliding into the central part of the city now. The glittering, glass-like pyramidal structures climbed to dizzy heights, and Drew felt as if he were traversing a canyon between manmade mountains. He looked up in awe at the web of transparent walks and galleries that connected the upper levels of the towering structures.

"Do people really live up there?" he asked wonderingly. "Many people?"

Walter Gilson snorted. "People with a great deal of money do. They call those residences top level sun-palaces."

"On Mars, we do not need to be wealthy to enjoy the sunlight," said Drew.

Drew saw that the streets here were transparent, like the walls of the buildings. He could look down through the glass-like pavement and see many other levels below, avenues swarming with rocket-cars. On the side of each street were motilators, or traveling sidewalks, with four bands that moved at progressively higher speeds.

Their cab darted abruptly into one of the gigantic pyramidal buildings. In a moment they were shooting skyward in a rocket-powered elevator. Gilson shepherded them out of the cage, down a corridor and into a suite of two offices whose transparent walls looked out on the super-city.

"Here we are!" Gilson nodded to a girl who had risen from her desk and was advancing toward them with a friendly smile. "This is Josephine Duff, my secretary."

The girl was small, her trim figure almost doll-like in a dark blue synthesuit. But there was nothing doll-like about her pert, pretty face, or the intelligent blue eyes that surveyed Stephen Drew sympathetically.

"So you're the young man who's never been off Mars before? Well, what do you think of Earth? How do you like our beautiful buildings and tall women?"

Drew made her the formal Martian bow. "The buildings are large, but Earth women are not as tall as Martians," he said gravely.

Her blue eyes widened a trifle. "Say, are you kidding me, or am I kidding you?"

"I am afraid I do not understand you."

"Oh, Jo is just joking," Gilson said hastily. He gave the girl an angry look.

"Sure, I'm just a clown at heart," Jo Duff drawled to the puzzled Drew. "Don't pay any attention to my little jokes, Martian. It's just my irrepressible fun-loving nature getting the best of me."

She stared at Lin L'Lan's alien, somber gesture. "Who's that, your bodyguard?" she asked. "What's he laughing about?"

"L'Lan is not laughing—" Drew began, but Jo waved a hand at him. "Forget I inquired. I can see you don't speak the language yet."

"Il farral li lato sur," muttered Lin L'Lan to Drew.

"What did he say?" asked Jo.

Drew explained uncomfortably. "On Mars, women who talk too much are exiled into the desert. L'Lan was saying that it is a pity there are no longer any deserts on Earth."

Jo laughed. "Good for grandpa! Tell him I'm glad I'm not a Martian gal."

Gilson led Stephen Drew and Lin L'Lan into an inner office. The chubby agent fished a sheaf of papers from his desk.

"Here's the dope on the whole situation, Drew. I don't mind telling you that we're up against it. Lucas Burdine's company has powerful influence with the Government. If he gets your tranium concession revoked, you can kiss your mining profits goodbye."

"It isn't the profits I'm thinking about. My father always turned half of them back to the Martians who dig the tranium for us, and I intend to do the same. What worries me is that if someone else gets the concession, my people may be ill-treated." Drew paused an instant, then went on: "Why should this man Burdine and his company want a monopoly? Isn't he independently wealthy already?"

"Sure, Burdine's well off," Gilson said. "But no man is ever satisfied with just what he's got. He wants to progress."

Drew shook his head. "I can't understand that. When you have enough to supply your needs, why should you want more?"

"Well, we can't discuss that question now, the fact is that Synthesubstances—Burdine's company—is out to get a monopoly on synthetic food production. You can see what

wealth and power would fall into their laps automatically. Burdine's company has been secretly buying up the other tranium concessions on Mars, through small dummy companies. When he gets your concession too, he'll be able to keep his biggest rival, Transmutation, from getting any tranium at all. They'll have to go out of business. Burdine figures that if you won't sell him your concession, he'll get it revoked, then step in and take over by Government grant."

Drew said nothing. Burdine's scoundrelism revolted him, as it had all along, and Gilson had told him little that was in any way a surprise to him.

"But I've got an idea as to how we can fight Burdine," Gilson went on animatedly. "My plan is—"

The door opened and the attractive blonde head of Jo Duff appeared. "Speaking of the devil, Lucas Burdine is outside. He wants to see Drew."

Gilson's eyes flashed in anger. "That cunning blackguard! He must have had somebody waiting at the spaceport to tip him off as soon as Drew arrived. Tell him that Drew has gone, Jo."

Jo nodded, and was just starting to turn when a man pushed past her into the office. He was middle-aged, a lean solidly built man with a dark, tight face and gimlet-like black eyes.

"You're Drew?" he barked at Drew. "I'm Lucas Burdine of Synthesubstances. I'll come right to the point. I want your tranium concession. I've got to have it, and I'm prepared to pay ten million in cash."

Drew stood up. He felt a hard anger crystalizing in him at sight of this man who was lost to all honor.

"Probably Gilson's told you not to sell," Burdine went on. "But I'm warning you *if* you don't sell to me now you'll face ruin. You'll get nothing."

Drew spoke calmly in Martian to Lin L'Lan. "This is our enemy, L'Lan. There is only one thing to do."

"*Sao, Ark Avul,*" agreed Lin L'Lan. "Let us be quick, before he escapes."

Stephen Drew suddenly plunged like a charging sand-cat at the astounded Burdine. The magnate tried to resist, but already Drew's lean hands were around his throat in the deadly neck-grip of Martian ju-jutsu. Then, before the horrified eyes of the others, Drew calmly exerted his strength to press upon a vital nerve in Burdine's neck.

III

BURDINE'S EYES bulged, and his face became congested, Gilson stood watching the two struggling men in horror. Jo Duff had enough presence of mind to run forward and grab Drew's arm.

"Martian, what are you doing? Are you out of your mind?"

Drew stared at her in bewilderment. "Why, this man is my enemy. I will stun him half to death as a warning that he must stop trying to take the tranium concession away from me and my people."

"But you can't do a thing like that! You can't—"

"Why not?" Stephen continued to stare at her in perplexity. "On Mars, when we have an enemy, we hunt him out and settle our quarrel with him in open combat."

"That may be the Martian way, but it's not the Earth way." Jo dragged him away from the almost unconscious magnate.

Gilson had recovered from his surprise. He stepped forward with a shocked, almost imploring look on his face. "She's right, Drew. If you go around attacking people just because they're your enemies, you'll get a long stretch in Lunar Prison."

Lucas Burdine had staggered back against the wall. His thin face was ashen with shock. "You're a maniac!" he cried thickly. "I'll have you locked up!"

Drew took a slow step forward, his neckcords swelling. "Better get out of here, Burdine," he said.

The magnate was cowed by the fury in Drew's eyes. He turned hurriedly and stumbled out of the office.

Stephen Drew turned to the agent. "If you can't fight enemies who are trying to wrong you, how do you deal with them?" he demanded. "Tell me that!"

"Here on Earth you use your *brains* to outwit men like Burdine," explained Gilson. "You've got to keep within the law. If you don't, you'll go to prison."

Lin L'Lan had watched these developments with amazement. Now he shot a sharp question at Drew. "*Qual ir virik*

lul?" he demanded. "Why did you let our enemy go, Ark Avul?"

"It seems they do not fight their enemies on Earth, L'Lan," muttered Drew. "They seek to outwit them by trickery. There is a severe penalty if you do battle with a man who has wronged you."

"*Kwis habek!* What a world! A penalty for attacking men who wrong you? Who ever heard of such a thing?"

"I remember my father saying that the laws of Earth were much different," Drew exclaimed, with bitterness. "But I did not think that they could be as different as this."

Jo Duff shook her head forebodingly. She seemed almost angry. "Martian, you're in for a lot of trouble on Earth," she said. "You're a grown Earthman, but you apparently know less of Earth customs than an ordinary three-year-old child."

Walter Gilson was wringing his plump hands in nervous dismay. "You may have ruined everything, Drew! Burdine could have you arrested for that assault."

Stephen Drew was silent, staring disconsolately past them at the mountainous city outside the transparent wall. The confusing complexity of rushing cars and rocket-fliers and motilators made this whole world seem unfriendly, hopelessly alien.

"You are right," he said finally. "I know nothing about these things."

"You've got to forget your Martian notions of behavior. You're not on Mars now. You can't do business by such crazy methods."

Drew looked helplessly at Gilson. "What shall I do? Go down to the Government officials and ask them not to revoke my concession?"

"You wouldn't get far—not with those high-hat bureaucrats in Government Tower," said Gilson, impatiently. "It takes influence to get anywhere with the Government—more influence than either of us possess. But I have a plan."

"There's one man in this city who has plenty of influence, and who would hate to see Burdine get your concession. That man is Jared Shane, the president of Transmutation. Shane knows that if Burdine gets control of your tranium he'll have a monopoly and will freeze out Transmutation. If we can get Jared Shane and his company to use his in-

fluence with the Government, we can fight Burdine's crowd."

"Shall I go and ask this Jared Shane to help us?" Drew asked hopefully.

"No, you can't do it that simply," Gilson said. "We mustn't let Burdine get wind that we're trying to get Shane's help. We've got to work under cover. I'll arrange for us to meet Jared Shane soon in an apparently casual fashion, then we can work on him for help. In the meantime, you and your Martian friend had better get under cover in case Burdine complains to the police. I'll send you to a good hotel."

Drew demurred. "I don't want to go to a hotel. I've heard that there is a Martian quarter here in New York, where all the Martians live together. I want to stay there."

"You mean Little Mars? Why, you wouldn't want to go there. You'd be looked at askance." Gilson reflected a moment, then snapped his fingers. "Say, maybe that would be a good place for you at that. It'll keep you out of the way of people. And you'll probably feel more at home there, for the place is Mars-conditioned. I'll take you down and put you in a rocket-cab."

Five minutes later Drew and the old Martian were relaxing in a fast-moving vehicle whose driver had instructions to take them to Little Mars. Drew looked out with bleak eyes at the amazing panorama of towering walls and speeding traffic all about them.

Noise seemed to have been outlawed in this super-city. There was only a soft, pulsing murmur from the thronging traffic. But brilliant "ion-signs" blazed in glowering letters in the air all about them. VISIT THE SKY CLUB—BEST STEREO-SHOW ON EARTH. TAKE THE THOMPSON TOUR OF THREE PLANETS. SNYTHESUBSTANCES—THE QUALITY BRAND.

Lin L'Lan said suddenly, "I do not like the man Gilson. I do not trust him."

"He is our friend, L'Lan. He seeks to help us."

"His thoughts were not good. I sensed trickery in them."

"It is trickery that he intends to use to defeat our enemies here," Drew said. "On Earth, men fight their battles deviously, and we must follow the Earth way."

L'Lan relapsed into sulky silence. Drew perceived that they were now approaching an area of older, smaller buildings. In this outlying district loomed a queer edifice. It was

a big dome-like bubble of transparent steel, almost two miles in diameter. Their rocket-car drew up presently by its curving, transparent wall.

"Here you are—Little Mars," said the driver. "I won't take you in. That place freezes me."

The car glided away and Stephen Drew and Lin L'Lan approached the entrance to the edifice. It was not an ordinary door, but a large air-lock set in the wall of the big dome. When they emerged through the inner lock into the interior of the bubble both Drew and the old Martian eyed each other with relief.

"Why, it is just like home!" Drew said eagerly.

The air inside the great dome was thin and sharply chill, like the bright, clear air of Mars. And, miraculously, gravitation was far weaker here, made so by antimagnetic plates buried in the ground.

Drew breathed the thin, pungent cold air gratefully into his lungs. It was a welcome relief after the damp, heavy Earth atmosphere. "Look, L'Lan, even the buildings here are in Martian style."

"Yes," muttered the old Martian approvingly. "This is the only true sanctuary I have yet seen on this mad planet."

A compact little town had been built inside the dome. It was like a transplanted section of a typical old Martian town. The buildings were flat-topped structures of solid stone, each a beautiful example of Martian architecture. The streets were typically narrow stone avenues.

The red-skinned Martians moving through the streets walked with grave, silent dignity and were a joy to behold after the whirling rush of the throngs outside. Most of these Martians wore Earth-type synthesuits of somber hues. Yet their reserved demeanor, the top-heavy stone buildings, the thinner air, and weaker gravity almost made Drew think that he was back on Mars.

He and L'Lan advanced along a narrow avenue bordered with curio-shops exhibiting displays of Martian leather and metal and glass articles, and came finally to a small inn with a single inscription over its door in rectangular Martian characters.

A middle-aged Martian with a black cloak over his soft leather jacket stood in the doorway of the hostelry. He scanned Stephen Drew and Lin L'Lan with shrewd, quiet eyes as they approached.

Drew bowed gravely to him. "May the two moons favor you," he said in greeting.

A look of faint surprise flickered in the eyes of the Martian innkeeper at hearing Drew address him in his own language.

"And you also." He bowed to Drew and L'Lan. "I am Th'Rulu, keeper of this inn. Can I serve you?"

Th'Rulu looked doubtful. "Earthmen never stay with me. I am desolated that I cannot receive you."

Lin L'Lan smiled tolerantly. "You make a natural mistake. This young man is of Earth blood but he is one of us. He is Ark Avul, of the Great Southwest Clan, and I am his servant."

"I ask your pardon, Ark Avul," hastily spoke the surprised Th'Rulu. "My rooms are at your disposal."

He led them into the building. Drew eyed the dusky, chilly stone chambers with approval.

"It is just like home," he told Th'Rulu. "I shall sleep in comfort here for the first time since we left Mars."

"And I, too," said Lin L'Lan. "This is the first time I have had real air to breathe for many days."

Th'Rulu nodded understandingly. "It is true that we of Mars cannot come to like the steamy air and remorseless gravitation of this planet. Indeed, it is injurious to our health. That is why, years ago, we pooled our resources to build this dome as a Mars-conditioned home for all our people here."

"Are there many of us Martians here?" Drew asked interestedly.

"Some thousands," Th'Rulu said. "Many of them are traders. Some are hired by the Earthmen for stratospheric scientific work, since they can endure the thin air better. Others teach our language in the Planetary Colonial College. Nearly all of them live here at night."

The innkeeper politely left them. Stephen Drew sat down and stared in thoughtful silence across the shadowy stone chamber.

"I wish we were back on Mars," said L'Lan after a moment. "Earth is not a good world."

"It's just strange to us, that's all. Remember, we have a friend here in Gilson. If his plan works, we shall not lose the tranium concession."

"I don't like fighting enemies by trickery," growled the

old Martian. "And what if the man Burdine has you seized by the law and sent to prison?"

"I don't know," said Drew, frowning. "The way these people plot against each other is as strange to me as it is to you. But I know that I will not be put in any prison like a caged sand-cat. I'll die first."

Night began to fall. It did not come with the sharp suddenness the way it did on Mars. Instead darkness crept about them and deepened by almost imperceptible stages.

"Let's go down and see if Gilson has sent any message," Drew said anxiously. "He said he would let me know if he contacted Jared Shane."

They went down to the quiet, bare public room of the inn. No message had come, and Drew's baffled discouragement deepened.

Th'Rulu led them out and introduced them formally to a group of other Martians who were sitting quietly on backless chairs just outside the door. There were Koh Kor and Dri Kor, two stalwart brothers engaged in demonstrating hypnotic hunting in an Earth circus; Az Akarau, a man from Syrtis engaged in making Martian jewelry for a New York company; and several others.

They sat silently sipping yellow kian wine from thin conical goblets. It was now completely dark. Soft lights were glowing along the streets and shops of this alien little town in the heart of New York. There were many more Martians in the streets now, returning home.

A burst of shrill laughter shattered the grave quiet of the scene. A group of young Earth people, muffled in cloaks against the chill and walking with grotesquely big steps, were approaching along the street.

"This gravitation makes me feel twice as drunk as I am!" one of them said loudly.

"Did you ever see such dumpy, queer little streets and buildings?" a girl chattered shrilly. "And all these Martians look so darned solemn."

Drew's ears burned. For a moment, he was almost ashamed of being an Earthman. His Martian companions were gravely regarding the group.

"A strange race, these Earth people," murmured Th'Rulu reflectively. "Noisy, impolite, greedy—penalizing each other for violence and yet applauding trickery as intelligent and laudable."

Drew was glad that his companions accepted him unreservedly as a Martian, ignoring his Earth blood.

A Martian coming along the street stopped and spoke quickly to them. "There comes one searching for Ark Avul."

Drew leapt to his feet in alarm. "L'Lan! If Burdine has sent them to arrest me—"

Th'Rulu moved quickly forward when he heard Drew's exclamation. The innkeeper wasted no time over futile questions.

"If it is the Earth police who search for you, I can hide you," he said quickly, with the loyalty of one Martian to another.

"Nothing to be gained by hiding," muttered Drew, his tall figure tense, his brown face serious.

"You should have killed the man Burdine when you had the chance," said Lin L'Lan.

Drew saw a slender figure approaching. He made out an attractive blonde head and heard himself hailed in a familiar voice.

"Hello there, Martian! How in the world do you stand the cold in here? I'm freezing."

Jo Duff wore a flowing, silken synthesuit of black embroidered with gold, over which was draped lightly a thin cloak. Her blue eyes searched Drew's tense face in puzzlement.

"What's the matter—do I look *that* bad?"

"I thought it was the police," Drew said, staring at her in relief. "I'm not afraid of them, *but* if they put me in prison now my hands will be tied."

"Relax," said the girl with a smile. "So far, Burdine hasn't set the sky-cops after you. You can worry about that contingency when it happens. You're going night-clubbing with me, Martian," she continued lightly. "Gilson called me and told me to take you out to the Submarine Club. He found out that Jared Shane will be there tonight. He's going to try to get together with Shane on this deal of yours."

The strained look went out of Drew's face. "That *is* good news! If Shane will help us—"

"I will go with you, Ark Avul," said Lin L'Lan.

"There is no need. Besides, the air and gravitation out there is hard on you, L'Lan."

Jo had a rocket-cab waiting outside the entrance of Little Mars. As the car threaded its way southward through the

maze of many-leveled streets, the girl moved closer to Drew, squeezing his arm reassuringly.

"You'll be moving in fast financial company, Martian. Burdine and Jared Shane and that crowd," she said. "You'll have to be plenty smart. But I'm convinced you'll outsmart them, and make money."

"But I don't want to make money. We don't have much use for money on Mars. I just want to make sure that the concession isn't given to someone who might oppress my people."

Jo's eyes lingered admiringly on his firm jaw and broad straight shoulders. "You know, I like you, Martian," she said impulsively. "There's something about you—"

The car was hurtling on through the seemingly endless labyrinth of the super-city. By night, New York was an even more bewildering spectacle. Soft blue light flowed through the many-tiered streets from hidden sources and dispelled the darkness everywhere.

Suddenly their car dived into a tunnel, and, jostling other speeding cars, raced down a spiral ramp. Stephen Drew felt a little giddy from that breathless rush downward through blue-lit spaces.

"Gravitation getting you, Martian?" asked Jo.

"No, it doesn't seem to bother me so much as it did at first. But the movement is very rapid."

Their rushing car turned with the other torpedo-shaped vehicles into a blue-lit, vaulted boulevard which bisected the lowest street-level. The thoroughfare was well beneath the ground, but traffic here was as thick as ever.

Presently their rocket-cab glided into a tunnel, a forty-foot tubeway through solid rock, divided into two lanes. It descended sharply, then ran straight ahead at a level gradient. There was not much traffic, and their vehicle shot along the blue-lit tubeway at terrific speed.

"We'll be there in ten minutes," Jo said. "We're under the ocean now."

"Under the ocean?" Drew turned and stared at her incredulously. "I thought we were going to a pleasure place."

"We are. The most unusual and expensive night club on Earth. Still, it's no wonder they charge steep prices. It cost them plenty to atom-blast this ten-mile tubeway out of the solid rock of the ocean bed."

Before Drew could ask further questions their car began to

slow down. Gradually it decelerated, and finally pulled into a big, brightly illuminated, rock-hewn lobby.

A tall attendant in brilliant red uniform hurried to open the car door. Drew followed the girl out, his thoughts in a turmoil. He saw that other cars were constantly pulling up. Men and women in rich synthesuits and cloaks were emerging from them—a sophisticated, laughing throng.

"Come on, Martian—this way to the gyp-palace," Jo said, laughing.

Rippling stringed music met Drew's ears as they reached the top of a high flight of plush stairs. He looked around at the interior of the club.

"Why, it's beautiful!" he exclaimed.

"At the prices they charge, it should be," said Jo, smiling. "Still, I've got to admit that you get gypped in a beautiful setting here."

The Submarine Club was a single large round room, several hundred feet in diameter. There was a small dance floor of polished beryllium alloy at its center. Around this were grouped small silver tables, each supported by legs shaped like the writhing tentacles of octopi. In an alcove near one edge of the room an orchestra was playing.

But the wonder of the place lay in something else. This room was at the bottom of the sea! It was roofed over by a curved dome of thick transparent steel, much like the dome which roofed Little Mars, but heavier. And that transparent barrier was all that shielded the luxurious night-club from the crushing weight of millions of tons of water.

Drew stared up, marveling. Through the clear transparent steel he could plainly see the green depths of the ocean. Indirect lights concealed by the over-lapping tiers of an underwater reef lit up the watery abyss with soft radiance. Fairy glades of tall sea-weed and anemones waved gently in the currents. Brilliant fish in schools, attracted by the light, swam by the walls. Then they rocketed away like shining streaks as a big, white-bellied shark nosed toward them.

"Come on, Martian," said Jo, plucking the sleeve of her fascinated companion. "There's my boss waiting for us."

Walter Gilson rose at his table as they approached. The chubby agent was now resplendent in an electric blue synthesuit whose sleeves and collar were worked with silver.

"Glad Jo got you here, Drew," he said. "I'm expecting Jared Shane any minute. Getting together in a place like

this was my idea. Burdine and his crowd won't be liable to suspect what we're planning. But let's eat first."

A waiter took Gilson's order. He brought them silver plates of bright red and green jellies, and a tall flagon of sparkling pink liquid.

"What is this stuff?" Drew asked, staring dubiously at his plate.

"Why, it's our supper," Gilson said. "Oh, I forgot—you don't use synthefoods on Mars. Well, these jellies have all the nutritional ingredients of a full meal. Yet they were made from sea-water elements by transmutation, down in the big synthefood plants under New York. Your tranium helped make this stuff."

Stephen Drew tasted the jellies warily. They were sweet and subtly flavored, and filling. Yet they seemed insipid to him. The pink in the flagon he found to have a mild, agreeable flavor.

"Careful, Martian," said Jo as he refilled his glass. "That stuff has a powerful wallop when you're not used to it."

Drew felt already a faint exhilaration from the synthetic stimulant. He looked around eagerly at the brilliant scene. The rippling music became softer, and one of the musicians rose to sing in a mellow baritone:

*"Where the moons of Mars and the desert stars
Look down from high above,
On a garden small by the South Canal—
It was there we found our love."*

"There are no gardens by the South Canal," Drew said as applause greeted the song.

"Oh well, these people don't know the difference," shrugged Joe. "Martian stuff is all the rage now with fashionable people."

"There comes Jared Shane now," said Gilson suddenly.

Drew turned to stare at the party of three people who were being escorted to a prominent table by a more-than-usually attentive headwaiter. He guessed that Jared Shane was the oldest of the two men. The wealthy president of Transmutation, Incorporated was a distinguished looking man of fifty, immaculate in a dark suit of rich synthesilk. His sleek gray hair and firm, powerful face had an oddly youthful look.

The other man was a tall, blond, virile fellow with a somewhat arrogant expression on his handsome face. But Drew hardly looked at him. His eyes had wandered to the third member of the party—a girl.

He had never seen a young woman more striking. She was slim and dark with midnight-black hair, and flashing dark eyes. Her hair was brushed straight back from the lovely, almost cameo-like oval of her face, and she wore a pure white synthesilk suit of sleeveless bodice and flowing trousers. Her only jewelry was a massive antique Martian bracelet of fire-rubies on one dainty wrist.

"Who is the girl?" Stephen Drew asked wonderingly.

"I thought you'd be asking that," Jo Duff said dryly. "She's the darling of the telenews men and stereo-photographers—Earth Glamor Girl Number One, Gloria Shane."

Gilson had risen hastily. "I'll go over and greet Shane now. When I give you a nod, you join us."

Drew saw the two men rise as the smiling agent approached their table. A moment of conversation followed; then Gilson turned and nodded.

"Come on, Martian—here's where you break into high society," said Jo Duff, rising.

Drew hesitantly followed her to the other table. Walter Gilson's plump, spectacled face was both beaming and anxious as he introduced them. Drew knew enough by now not to give the formal Martian greeting. He felt a little uncomfortable, but Jared Shane's affability warmed him.

"So you're one of the men we get our tranium from?" Shane said pleasantly. "Gilson has told me about you, Mr. Drew. Let me present you to my daughter, Gloria. This is Vincent Riskin, my first vice-president."

Riskin acknowledged the introduction without cordiality, eying Drew's shapeless synthewool suit with open disapproval. Gloria Shane stared into Drew's face with cool interest in her dark, level eyes.

"So you're the man I've been hearing so much about," she said. "Tell me—is Mars really as wild and savage as they say? I've thought of taking a trip there, just for the thrill."

"You would like it," Drew said eagerly. "It is not like this crowded Earth. The desert is wonderful—empty and immense."

Gloria Shane smiled. "You make it sound a little forbid-

ding, though not unattractive. It would at least be something new. I get bored with this empty life."

"Well, if your life is empty, you might try punching an electromewriter in an office all day," said the irrepressible Jo. "That is guaranteed to take the emptiness out of existence."

Gilson scowled at his secretary, his eyes dark with reproach, but Gloria only smiled. "I'm sure that a working girl's life has its compensations," she said.

Stephen Drew ceased to stare admiringly at Gloria Shane, realizing that her father was addressing him.

"Gilson's been telling me that Lucas Burdine is trying to buy your tranium concession," said Jared Shane. "Are you going to sell to him?"

"I wouldn't sell to anyone," Drew said earnestly. "But we're afraid that he's going to get the Government to revoke the concession."

"That's like Burdine. Your mine would just about give him a monopoly on tranium, Drew. That would be bad. Not only for our own company—though of course I'd hate to see Transmutation squeezed out. I'm thinking of what a monopoly on synthefood production would mean. Burdine could dictate the price of all synthefoods and extort billions by profiteering at the expense of Earth's people.

"I hadn't thought of that," said Stephen Drew. "I guess I've been a little selfish. All I've thought of is what would happen to my own Martian people if someone else got hold of my concession."

"Shane, can't you use Transmutation's influence with the Government to oppose this revocation that Burdine's after?" Gilson asked quickly.

Drew waited tensely for the magnate's answer. He felt his heart sink as Jared Shane slowly shook his head.

"I'm afraid not, Gilson," Shane said. "My directors might not be willing. You see, if we tried to swing the Government in young Drew's favor, Burdine might charge us with conspiracy and queer the whole thing. He's a pretty ruthless operator, you know.

"Besides," went on Jared Shane thoughtfully, "Vincent here and some of my other directors think it would be smarter to sell out our whole plant to Burdine before he squeezes us out. He's made us an offer for it."

"But if you sold out to him, he'd have a strangle-hold monopoly on synthefoods!" said Drew earnestly.

"I know, and that's what troubles me. I'd rather fight him to the last ditch than give him a chance to be a world-wide profiteer at the people's expense."

Vincent Riskin, the blond young vice-president of Transmutation, spoke out in vigorous protest. "Sentiment has no place in business. If we don't accept Burdine's offer, we'll find ourselves out in the cold. He'll control the whole tranium supply and we'll have no alternative but to close down our plants."

"Still," said Jared Shane thoughtfully, "if we were *sure* we could obtain a steady supply of tranium from Drew's mine —" He broke off, looking significantly at Riskin.

"I'm going to take the whole matter up with my directors tomorrow morning," he concluded, after a pause. "Suppose you come down to our offices about noon and see me?"

"I will, of course," Drew said eagerly.

"Our offices are down by our Number One plant," Jared Shane said. "Gilson can tell you later how to get there."

Vincent Riskin was staring at Drew in open hostility. "I still think it's foolish even to consider such action," he said. "I shall oppose it before the directors."

Drew felt an equal hostility to the scornful young vice-president rising in him.

But Gloria Shane's cool voice intervened. "Are you men through talking business now? I'm bored to death. I'd like to dance."

The orchestra was playing a popular waltz number. Gloria Shane stood up. "You can dance with me," she said, drawing close to Stephen.

Drew squirmed, flushing uneasily under his tan. "I'm sorry," he stammered. "I don't know how."

She laughed a little. "Don't Martians dance? Come on, try—it's simple enough."

Drew found himself out on the polished beryllium floor, Gloria's slim figure in his arms. He followed her lead, moving to the rhythmic, swinging strings of the music. He was acutely aware of her seductive loveliness—the firmness of her body so close to him, the subtle scent of her hair.

"You're doing fine," she said. "Like it?"

"Why, yes—I like it a lot. That music is better than the pipes and drums the Martians play when the moons rise."

She laughed again. "You're the most unusual man I've met this season—and the most interesting."

"And you're the most beautiful girl I ever saw, Miss Shane," Stephen Drew said earnestly, wondering where he had found the courage to speak his mind so boldly.

She made a little mock-curtsey. "Thank you kindly, sir. And let's make it Stephen and Gloria in the future."

"Vincent is glaring at us," she said a moment later. "We'd better go back to them. But I'll see you tomorrow. I'll take you down to father's plant, if you like. Where are you staying?"

"In Little Mars."

"Little Mars? Really?" Gloria said. "Well, I'll pick you up there an hour before noon."

Drew felt a little dizzy as he rejoined the others at the table. His eyes clung to Gloria, up to the moment when she and her father left, with Riskin stiffly preceding them out of the night club.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Mr. Drew," Jared Shane reminded him as they parted. "I hope I'll have favorable news from our directors' meeting."

"Aren't they great people?" said Drew eagerly, looking after them. "I mean Mr. Shane and his daughter."

"You certainly seemed to do all right with the daughter," commented Jo Duff dryly. "Better watch your wings, Martian. You're flying a little high for your first night on Earth."

Walter Gilson's florid face was anxious. "I think Shane would back us, Drew, if he can get his directors to agree. But that confounded young snob Riskin is all for selling out their company to Burdine. Well, we'll just have to be patient. We'll know tomorrow what they decide."

They returned together to New York and parted at the entrance of Little Mars. Drew walked swiftly toward the air-lock door, reliving in his mind the minutes in which he had held Gloria Shane in his arms.

"Ark Avul, *di karol*!" rasped a low voice in Martian, startling him, and bringing him up short.

It was Lin L'Lan. The old Martian had been waiting in the darkness outside the entrance of Little Mars.

"Come see what I have done for you, Ark Avul," he said proudly.

Puzzled and somewhat apprehensive, Drew followed him to a rocket-car parked nearby. Lin L'Lan opened the door of the car and pointed triumphantly inside.

Drew stared for a long moment, then recoiled. On the floor of the car were sprawled the still bodies of Lucas Burdine and another Earthman!

In grim silence Drew examined the two men. To his relief, he found that they were only unconscious. Apparently, they had been made senseless by a telepathic pressure on certain nerves at the back of the neck—a familiar enough Martian trick. Burdine's companion was a sharp-featured young Earthman whom he had never seen before.

Drew turned to Lin L'Lan. The Martian stood erect, proudly awaiting praise. "Here is your enemy in our power, Ark Avul. We can kill them if you so desire, and then go back to Mars."

"L'Lan, you don't know what you're talking about!" Drew exclaimed, his voice harsh with reproach. "How did you overpower these men?"

"Burdine and the other man came into Little Mars looking for you. Th'Rulu and our other friends would tell them nothing. I secretly followed them out when they left. As they entered their car, I disabled them with my mind before they could realize what had happened to them.

"I did not kill them immediately," Lin L'Lan continued calmly, "because I thought you might wish to force information from them. If you don't, I may as well kill them at once."

"L'Lan, it's a criminal transgression to kill enemies here on Earth!" Drew said. "I've told you that before. I've warned you. We must win our fight the Earth way."

"By trickery and plotting? I do not like such ways of fighting. You're becoming an Earthman, Ark Avul!"

Stephen Drew paid little heed to the accusation. He was thinking.

"Burdine and this other fellow must have been searching for me to arrest me—or perhaps to frighten me into selling out," he muttered. "But they won't know who attacked them. They may guess, but they can prove nothing. We'll revive them and get out of sight before they're completely conscious."

Drew expertly kneaded the paralyzed nerves, giving his attention to both men in turn. They began to stir feebly as consciousness returned. Drew hastily led L'Lan through the air-lock into the dome of Little Mars.

Watching from a ground-floor window, they presently

saw the rocket-car pull away. Drew sighed in relief.

"They've had enough for tonight, anyway," he said. "Now, if Jared Shane can persuade his company to help me, we'll defeat Burdine."

"Plotting and scheming!" grunted Lin L'Lan sulkily. I don't like it. You're letting these Earthmen make a complete fool of you."

"You have to fight fire with fire, L'Lan. You can't defend your rights too openly on this world. To attempt to do so would indeed be the act of a fool."

The next morning Stephen Drew left early for a synth-suit-maker whose address Gilson had given him. He wished earnestly to improve his attire. The tailor proved to be a suave, dapper little man who eyed Drew's shapeless garments with unconcealed disdain. He displayed samples of shimmering synthetic silks for Drew's selection.

"Now if you'll just step into the measuring-machine, sir—"

The measuring-machine looked like an empty metal booth. Drew entered it and the tailor touched a switch. Pale rays of light sprang from the wall, mechanically "scanning" Drew's measurements and transmitting them to a slowly revolving mechanism nearby.

The tailor regulated the controls of the mechanism to produce one of the synthetic fabrics which Drew had selected. The machine purred softly for a few minutes. The dapper little man turned it off and drew out a newly made, one-piece seamless jacket of shimmering black synthesilk. The loose trousers followed in a moment.

Drew finally went back to Little Mars, much poorer, but with three fashionable synthesuits in a package under his arm.

He donned a silken white suit, then anxiously inspected himself in a mirror at Th'Rulu's inn. L'Lan sat watching him sourly.

"You look silly as a pimul bird," grunted the old Martian. "How Oul Vorn and the others back home would laugh to see you attired in such outlandish garments."

"I have to look like a somebody here on Earth, or I couldn't get anywhere at all," Drew retorted defensively.

The following morning Drew was waiting eagerly in the sunlight outside Little Mars, when a swift-moving silver torpedo rounded the corner and swept up to him. In the trim little rocket-car sat Gloria Shane.

"You don't mind if I'm a little late?" she laughed, as he climbed in. "You really should feel complimented. I seldom get up this early. Never, in fact."

Drew's heart skipped a beat. Gloria looked even more beautiful than she had the night before. She wore a silver-gray suit that matched the metallic hue of the car and set off perfectly her dark hair and eyes.

Drew waited eagerly for her to make some comment about his own changed appearance. But instead, she looked curiously at Little Mars.

"Do you really enjoy living in there?"

Drew flushed, and decided to say nothing, hoping she wouldn't repeat the question.

They cut westward, whizzed down a ramp to a lower level, threaded through swarming traffic, and then raced down a spiral ramp into the great blue-lighted, vaulted boulevard at the lowest level.

Five minutes later they emerged from a tunnel into a big, perfectly lighted parking court, which was hollowed from the solid rock deep beneath New York. Drew followed the girl along a maze of tiled corridors. They proceeded in silence until she called his attention to a corridor leading into a vast, brilliantly illumed square.

"That's Plant One in there, Stephen," she said. "It's the biggest of the company's six synthefood factories."

"Can I look at it? I've always wanted to see one of the big transmutation plants."

Gloria laughed. "As a matter of fact, I've never seen it myself, though I've been down here often enough. Come along. I suppose it's my duty to inspect the source of the family fortune at least once."

They went down the corridor and into a cavernous space so enormous that Stephen Drew could only stare and draw in his breath. It was three hundred feet wide and five hundred feet high, and it swept away into blue-lit distances for more than a mile. Throughout the blueness bulked a gigantic line of gleaming chambers, pipes and other mechanisms.

A chief technician came hurrying up and touched his cap to Gloria with respect. Her identity was obviously well known to everyone.

"We want to look along the production line," the girl told him.

"I'll be delighted to show you, Miss Shane," the technician

said quickly, his eyes lingering for an instant on her slightly flushed face. "This way, please."

He pointed to a huge metal penstock that descended through the rock wall toward a towering cubical chamber at the head of the line.

"Sea-water flows steadily down through that penstock," he explained. "When it reaches this section it is swiftly distilled to remove all salts and impurities. Then it is quickly converted into pure hydrogen and oxygen by high-powered electrolysis. The hydrogen flows onward through those big white pipes over there."

He led the couple along the cat-walk to a point where forty hydrogen pipes led into as many bulbous chambers of very massive lead.

"In every one of those chambers the hydrogen is converted into forty different elements by artificial transmutation. The process is essentially similar in each chamber. It involves building up the atomic number of the hydrogen atoms."

The man glanced at Gloria. "Since I don't suppose you are much interested in science, I'll merely summarize the process. Hydrogen is the simplest of the chemical elements, having one positive charge in its nucleus, and one electron. If another positive charge and another electron are added, it becomes the element helium. By just such atomic synthesis, we build simple hydrogen into more complex elements."

He pointed to several thin transparent steel tubes through which a fine trickle of gray powder was flowing into the top of each atom-synthesis chamber.

"That gray powder is tranium, isn't it?" Stephen Drew exclaimed. He had recognized the mineral from long familiarity.

"That's right, sir. Tranium, a radioactive element found only on Mars, is essential for the process of atomic synthesis. You see, the disintegrating tranium emits sub-atomic particles in twins—one neutron and one electron. When such a twin joins a hydrogen atom, it adds an extra electron and an extra charge to the nucleus, and the hydrogen atom is instantly changed to a helium atom. In that way, we can synthesize forty elements, for the number of twins emitted by the disintegrating tranium can be absolutely controlled."

He showed them the pipes that ran from the forty atomic synthesizers into great boiler-like retorts.

"The newly synthesized elements are admitted to those

big retorts automatically, in just the right amounts to form the organic compounds that make up proteins, carbohydrates and other food bases."

Stephen Drew looked wonderingly at the streams of semi-solid jellies which were being pumped ceaselessly out of the giant retorts through thick tubes.

"Further along are the finishing machines, which inject artificial flavors and colors into the synthefood jellies," the technician explained.

"We've not time to see more, Stephen," interrupted Gloria Shane. "Father will be waiting."

She nodded curtly and turned away from the talkative technician with a slight shrug. Drew uttered a hasty word of thanks and followed her out of the chamber.

"Were you bored with all that science?" she asked. "I was."

"No, I was impressed," Drew said, thoughtfully. "Those huge machines, pumping out food for billions—it would give tremendous power to any man who secured a monopoly on tranium."

Gloria had led him through the maze of gleaming tiled corridors into a brightly lighted warren of underground offices. A male secretary admitted the girl and her companion into a guarded suite.

"Gloria, you didn't tell me you were coming down today," said Vincent Riskin, arising from his desk and coming toward them. Then the young vice-president caught sight of Drew. He frowned. "Oh, so you came with him."

Drew stiffened, but held his anger in check.

Riskin nodded toward an inner office. "Mr. Shane is waiting for you, Drew. I'm sure you'll be interested in what he has to say."

Jared Shane greeted Drew with an apologetic smile, rising from his desk more slowly than Riskin had done, and looking far more troubled. "Drew, I'm afraid I have some bad news for you."

Stephen Drew's heart sank. "Your directors wouldn't agree to help me with the Government to retain my concession? Is that it?"

"They were reluctant to do so," said Shane. "You see, Riskin and some of the others believe that we should accept Burdine's offer and sell out. They say that if we oppose Burdine's influence in this matter, and lose out to him,

he'll be in a position to exert dangerous pressure, even to destroy utterly."

"But you can't let Burdine get a synthefood monopoly! You said yourself that it would be an evil thing for a man like that to win absolute control of Earth's food supply."

"I know—it goes against my conscience," conceded Jared Shane troubledly. "But Riskin and the others are right about the danger we'd be facing."

Shane remained silent for a moment, his eyes shadowed as he stared past Drew at the silver-paneled office wall. "There's one possible solution," he said finally. "I might get the others to back you in this fight if they were absolutely sure you would continue to supply us with tranium. Remember, Burdine controls nearly all the other tranium sources through his dummy companies."

"I'd certainly agree to sell tranium only to Transmutation!" Drew said with emphasis.

"We could incorporate your tranium mine as a subsidiary of Transmutation. As such, your mine would be legally a part of our company and we could go before the Government and put up a strong fight against revocation of the concession. The Government wouldn't be likely to deprive us of our sole source of tranium, if that source legally belonged to us."

"Make my mine a subsidiary of Transmutation?" Drew asked. "Do you mean that my title would pass to your company?"

"Not at all, Drew. You see, your mine would be incorporated as a subsidiary but you would still hold all the stock in it. The only restriction on you would be an agreement to sell tranium only to us."

Stephen Drew's hopes soared. "Why, that would solve everything! Do you think your directors would all be willing to agree to it?"

Jared Shane's jaw set. "Drew, I'm going to make them agree to it or resign. My mind is made up. I'm not going to let that scoundrel Lucas Burdine get a monopoly that will allow him to profiteer at the expense of all Earth's people."

He stepped resolutely forward and gripped Drew's hand warmly. "Drew, you've helped me decide a question that's long been worrying me. I've felt guilty all along at the thought of selling out to Burdine."

He went with Stephen Drew to the door. "It's going to

take some time and effort to sell this plan to my directors. In the meantime, you'll naturally want to make sure that your agent approves of it."

"I know Gilson will approve," said Drew. "We hardly hoped for such help as this."

"Nevertheless, you get Gilson's opinion. I want you to be satisfied you're doing the right thing. And I'll let you know as soon as I can talk Riskin and the others into agreeing with me."

At mention of Riskin's name, Drew's eager hopes dulled a little. He knew that the young vice-president didn't like him, and would probably vigorously oppose the plan.

Riskin was talking to Gloria Shane when Drew came out. He was scowling and there was an angry glint in his eyes. But Gloria was sitting on the edge of a metalloy desk, calmly swinging her slim ankles.

"Is Father going to help you?" she asked, looking straight at Drew.

Drew glanced uncertainly at Riskin. "He isn't sure yet that he can. But he has a plan."

"Well, anyway, you're through with business today," said Gloria, getting off the desk. "Come on—I'll show you the town."

"You had a date with me," Riskin said, his voice harshly reproachful.

"Did I?" said Gloria sweetly. "I must have been confused. Come on, Stephen."

Drew looked back as they went out and saw that Vincent Riskin was glaring after them. Drew was troubled.

"He doesn't like me much," he said.

Gloria laughed, but made no reply. Her slim fingers grasped his hands as they crossed the square and entered the silver rocket-car.

They traveled miles northward in a few minutes. The terraced pyramids were not so overwhelming on the outskirts of the city and the skyway swooped lower.

Hours later, the world swam in a warm, soft darkness as Gloria drove homeward along the skyway. She stopped the car at the edge of the high-flung skyway and gestured toward the brilliant, incredible towers that loomed ahead.

"This is the best of all views of New York, Stephen," she murmured.

Her cool, beautiful little face was turned to him and her dark eyes were provocative. Drew hesitantly touched her silken shoulders, as though she were something precious and fragile. Greatly daring, he kissed her.

Gloria laughed a little as she drew back. "I thought a wild Martian's kiss would be more thrilling than that."

He kissed her again, savagely this time. Her lips were sweet and yielding, her arms cool around his neck.

VI

JO DUFF LOOKED at Drew in amazement when he entered Gilson's office the following morning. "Why, Martian, you have become a fashion-plate," she said, her pert blue eyes incredulous, as she noted his expensive tan synthesuit. "I'll bet you spent more for that outfit than you ever spent in a year on Mars."

"Well, I had to dress properly," Stephen Drew said defensively. "I couldn't run around with Gloria and her friends in an old-fashioned suit."

Jo's blue eyes narrowed a trifle. "So you've been stepping out with Glamor Girl Number One? Martian, let me give you a word of warning—that gal is no good for you."

"Precisely what do you mean by that?"

Jo shrugged. "Only that she has a habit of decoying nice young men up into the stratosphere and then letting them drop. She's latched on to you because you're a novelty—a Martian Earthman. But she'll get tired of you and go back, as she always does, to Vincent Riskin."

"You don't know what you're talking about! You're saying these things just because you're envious of Gloria's wealth and position. I know her better than you, and I don't believe a word of it."

Walter Gilson, attracted by their voices, came hurrying out of the inner office. "What did Jared Shane say, Drew?" he asked. "Did he agree to use his influence to help you retain your concession?"

Drew told him about Jared Shane's proposal. He chose

his words carefully, repeating what the magnate had said without elaboration.

"It seems like a good plan to me," he finished, with conviction.

"Good?" said Walter Gilson. "It's terrific! Why, if your mine becomes a subsidiary of Transmutation, Burdine won't have influence enough to touch your concession. Say, I never even dreamed that Shane would go to such lengths to help you."

He poked Drew slyly in the ribs. "I'll bet that daughter of his has been talking to him, eh? Nice going, Drew!"

Drew flushed. "Well, as a matter of fact, Mr. Shane wasn't at all sure that he could get his directors to agree to this plan. But he said he'd do his best."

"He ought to be able to swing them, if Vincent Riskin doesn't put up too much of a fight. Riskin is determined on selling out the whole company to Burdine. I sometimes wonder if he hasn't made a secret deal with Burdine. However, Jared Shane should be able to overcome his opposition."

Jo Duff had been listening, and spoke up now. "If I were you, Martian, I'd be mighty careful. People who go into deals with big corporations sometimes come out without their shirts."

"You don't understand," Drew said impatiently. "Even though my mine is incorporated as a subsidiary, I will still own it, for I will hold all the stock. All I do is agree to sell tranium only to Transmutation."

"Of course," said Walter Gilson. "Shane's got to have some guarantee of a tranium supply before he openly bucks Burdine. I only hope that Shane will be able to swing his company directors to this plan."

He turned angrily to the girl. "Suppose you confine yourself to your secretarial duties instead of commenting on affairs you know nothing about, Miss Duff? Your wisecracks at the Submarine Club the other night were out of place, too."

Drew felt uncomfortable at seeing the girl reprimanded, even though he was a little resentful himself. He turned to leave, then paused a moment at the door.

"I'm moving out of Little Mars," he said casually. He named a hotel. "I'm taking a suite there. Gloria Shane said it was a good address."

But when Drew returned to Little Mars and informed the old Martian of his intention to change his quarters, L'Lan proved difficult. In the first place, he could not see any reason for the change.

"Our own people are here, Ark Avul," said the old Martian. "Th'Rulu and the Kors and the others are good friends you can depend on. Why do you want to live out among those Earthmen, in that colossal madhouse?"

"You don't understand, L'Lan. These Earth people go a lot by where a man lives and how he dresses."

"Then you are ashamed to let your Earth friends think you live here in the Martian quarter?" said the old man bluntly.

"No, of course not," said Stephen Drew, embarrassed. "But it's inconvenient, living down here. I'll come down often to see you, of course."

"What do you mean? If you must go, I'll go with you."

"No, L'Lan, it would be too hard on you, living all the time out there," Drew said earnestly. "I've got pretty accustomed to the atmosphere and gravitation. But you haven't and it would harm you."

"Perhaps Ark Avul, you fear your new friends might laugh at you for associating with old L'Lan," said the Martian gloomily.

Drew was distressed by the accusation. He knew that he was honest enough in his desire to save L'Lan from the injurious Earth conditions. Finally he succeeded in convincing the Martian that it was best for him to stay.

The hotel Drew had chosen was a massive pyramid not far from Gilson's office. Suavely courteous employees took charge of him the moment he entered the mirror-paneled lobby. A rocket-lift shot him up to a lofty floor, and a courteous official showed him into his suite, the most costly in the establishment.

"The televisior is right here in your living room, sir," the official told Drew, indicating the compact instrument with its square glass screen. "The panel beside it operates the automatic synthefood service. If there is anything else you require, we'll be honored to serve you."

Drew felt a little lonely when the man had gone. Somehow, he almost wished that he were back in the bare stone chamber in Th' Rulu's inn.

And he missed Lin L'Lan's silent presence.

He was starting to unpack when the televisior buzzed softly. Drew fumbled until he found the button that switched it on.

His heart skipped a beat as Gloria Shane's cool, beautiful face appeared in the screen.

"So you've already moved, Stephen? How would you like to go out to Weightless Gardens with some of my friends tonight?"

"You know I'd go anywhere with you!" Drew said, not quite realizing how daring the words must have sounded to her.

She laughed softly. "All right. We'll pick you up in an hour or so."

Dusk was already deepening, and the concealed lights of Drew's rooms were coming on automatically. Hastily he changed into a dark, silken evening synthesesuit.

He was waiting in the street when Gloria and her friends arrived. There were a dozen of them—a hilarious, shouting young crowd jammed tightly into a long, golden rocket-car.

"There's your man from Mars, Gloria!" called one of the girls. "Make room for him back here. I'd like very much to talk to him."

"Room for one man from Mars!" gravely echoed a handsome young man flushed from too much synthesesuit.

Drew, schooled as he was in the grave, quiet Martian courtesy, disliked squeezing himself into the midst of this noisy, disorderly crowd. But he forgot his momentary uneasiness when he found room beside Gloria, and felt the touch of her cool fingers on his hand.

"I was hoping I'd have a chance to see you alone tonight," he said earnestly as the big rocket-car started.

She smiled. "Maybe later, Stephen. You'll like Weightless Gardens. It's lots of fun."

The car had been threading a bewildering maze of ramps and skyways. It drew up finally before a high, cubical structure. Over it in the darkness flamed a blue ion-sign—**WEIGHTLESS GARDENS.**

They had no sooner entered the brightly-lighted garden interior of the big building when Drew was startled by the sight of a young man gleefully waltzing with a girl, both of them floating twenty feet above the ground.

He saw that over the center of the garden floated an enormous spherical mass of water, held together by co-

hesion. In and out of this miraculously suspended sphere plunged floating men and girls in bathing suits. And not only people, but tables, chairs and cushions were floating in incredible suspension high above the ground.

"Why, what is it?" Drew exclaimed. "I never saw anything like this before!"

Gloria laughed. "There's no gravity in this garden, Stephen. All gravity is scientifically neutralized by anti-magnetic plates buried under the soil. The roof is designed to keep the air in. Watch me!"

Gloria stepped forward from the entrance into the building. Then, with a slight leap, she glided up into the air in graceful rocket-like flight. Drew followed her, a little reluctantly. And as he stepped into the interior of the de-gravitized building, he found himself shooting up after her.

He floundered awkwardly in the air ten feet above the ground. Gloria Shane was almost instantly at his side, laughing at his awkwardness.

"The only way you can make progress here is to paddle the air with your hands. Come on—I'll help you."

She held one of his hands, and they made swimming motions like the others. There followed a series of crazy antics by Drew's companions.

He was tired of it long before the others had had enough. It seemed a silly, childish form of recreation to him—not to be compared to the fierce thrill of tracking rock-dragons in the Great South Desert.

Drew felt a sudden vague alarm as his eyes rested upon two men who had just entered the gardens. They were tight-faced, dark Earthmen.

"Gloria, I'm pretty sure those two men are following me," he said, his fingers tightening on her arm. "I've been seeing them too often for it to be a mere coincidence. If Burdine has sent them to spy on me—"

"It probably is a coincidence," she said reassuringly. "But if you want to leave now, we can. I'm tired of this myself."

She called to their merrymaking companions, and presently they were all out in the soft darkness again.

"The evening's just begun!" one youth announced enthusiastically. "We've still time to take in that swell new stereo-show at the Metropole."

They crammed into the gold rocket-car.

Gloria demurred. "You others go on ahead and Stephen

and I will follow in a rocket-cab. This car's too crowded."

"Better look out, Gloria!" called back one of the half-intoxicated girls as the car sped away. "Men from Mars are dangerous."

It happened very quickly, a minute or two after they were alone in another, hastily summoned car. Her lips were warm and soft when he kissed her, and her dark hair fragrant against his cheek.

He held her for a long moment without speaking.

"Gloria," he whispered earnestly, "do you think your father would object to our marrying?"

"Our *marrying*?"

He searched her face anxiously. "Don't all Earth people marry when they love each other, just as they do on Mars?"

"Why, yes, of course." Gloria laughed. "But we'll have lots of time to think about things like that."

It was almost morning before the noisy party broke up. Drew got back to his hotel, tired, his head aching from too many synthestimulants. And he was vaguely worried, for in the Sky Club he had noticed the quiet, withdrawn presence of the two tight-faced men he suspected of trailing him.

A sharp-featured young man stepped up to Stephen Drew just as he reached his rooms. It was the man who had accompanied Burdine to Little Mars!

"Mr. Drew, I've got to see you," he said. "It's urgent—"

PLOP! Something burst in the man's face. He swayed backwards with a choking gasp, clutched at his throat and sank quietly to the floor. Drew got a whiff of pungent, overpowering vapor.

He whirled around. The two tight-faced Earthmen who had been on his mind at this very moment were hastily approaching. One of them was pocketing a small, compact hand-gun.

The man who was pocketing the small weapon spoke hastily. "It's all right, Mr. Drew. Mr. Gilson hired us to see that none of Lucas Burdine's men bothered you. We got this fellow just in time with a gas pellet."

"Do you mean that you've been following me all this time?" Drew asked incredulously.

"That's right," he said. "We've strict orders from Mr. Gilson to keep watch over you. We've tried not to be obtrusive about it."

"That's thoughtful of Gilson," said Stephen Drew. "But I'm used to fighting my own battles."

The two men had lifted the sharp-featured man to his feet, and were supporting his sagging body between them.

"We'll take him down in the freight-lift and dump him in a park," they told Drew. "He'll be all right when he wakes up."

Drew thoughtfully went on into his rooms. He didn't like this idea of a bodyguard. And he was vaguely troubled because his date with Gloria had seemed somehow elusively unsatisfactory.

VII

HE SLEPT HEAVILY on the unfamiliar helium-mattressed bed until the insistent buzzing of the televisor awoke him late in the morning.

The instant he manipulated the dials, Walter Gilson's face appeared on the screen.

"Drew, it's all settled," the agent said jubilantly. "Jared Shane just called and informed me that his directors have agreed to incorporate your tranium mine as a subsidiary of Transmutation. We're to go down to their offices now and sign the agreement."

"I'll be right over to your office!" Drew assured him, and clicked off the transmission.

When he entered Gilson's office, the chubby agent slapped him on the back in congratulation.

Drew asked almost immediately, "Where's Jo. I'd like to tell her the good news."

Walter Gilson shook his head. "I had to discharge her. She's been altogether too impudent lately, and yesterday I caught her prying into my private files. I've an idea Lucas Burdine has bribed her."

Stephen Drew looked incredulous. "I can't believe she would do anything dishonest."

"Neither did I, till I caught her in the act," Gilson said ruefully. He took Drew's arm. "Come on. We're going down

to the Transmutation offices right now and sign before Shane changes his mind!"

When Drew and the agent entered Shane's office the magnate greeted Drew with a warm handshake. Vincent Riskin contented himself with a stiff nod.

"The agreement's all ready, Drew," Shane said. "Here it is. As you'll note, it gives us permission to incorporate the Drew Tranium Mine as a subsidiary of Transmutation. You're to hold all stock in the subsidiary, but our directors will have nominal control of operation and the exclusive right to buy tranium from your mine."

"Better let me look it over," said Walter Gilson shrewdly. "I'm sure Mr. Shane won't mind. It's just routine—"

"You're very careful," said Vincent Riskin. "If I'd had my way, our company would never have agreed to this plan."

"Now, Vincent, it's perfectly proper for Mr. Gilson to examine the agreement," Jared Shane said reprovingly.

Gilson keenly perused the agreement. Then he looked up with a smile. "Nothing wrong with this, Drew. You can go ahead and sign."

Stephen Drew carefully signed his name to both copies of the document. When Shane handed him one of the copies he squared his shoulders in prideful gratification, and relief.

"I'm certainly glad we're protected now," he said. "I've been haunted ever since I came here by the possibility that strangers might get hold of our mine, and exploit our Martian workers. It's good to know that I'm helping to prevent Burdine's company from running roughshod over men with human integrity and good will."

Jared Shane accompanied him to the door. "We'll have to celebrate this event tonight," he said genially. "Gloria is having some friends at our home. We'll expect you at eight."

Walter Gilson became expansive when they were outside, and on their way back up to the surface in the agent's rocket-car.

"Drew, your worries are over!" he said. "With Transmutation behind you, Burdine won't have a chance in the world of getting your concession revoked. You've done very well in high finance for a man with no knowledge of the ropes."

"I'm convinced that Gloria helped a lot more than she'd care to admit," Drew said, with a warm gratefulness in his voice. "I can't wait till I see her."

At the stroke of eight that night, Stephen Drew entered the Shane sun-palace atop one of the larger truncated pyramids in the heart of New York.

The whole flat summit of the colossal structure had been transformed into a fairy garden. Blossoming, graceful trees and banks of brilliant flowers rose from the soft green turf, and in the center of this moonlit sky-garden rested the shimmering bubble that was Jared Shane's mansion.

Gloria Shane came through the moonlight toward him, slim in a gold-embroidered, silken white suit. A green jewel smoldered in her dark hair. "Hello, Martian!" she said.

For just a moment, Drew was troubled by a painful memory. "Martian" was what Jo Duff had always called him, and he hated to think of the blonde-haired, irrepressible Jo in trouble.

But Gloria's intoxicating nearness quickly swept away the worrying thought. His eyes dwelt with tenderness on the soft, moonlit planes and curves of her lovely face.

"Come along, Stephen," she said. "Vincent is already here."

Drew had no desire to see Vincent Riskin and said so, but Gloria only laughed and drew him toward the edge of the garden. The vice-president of Transmutation was lounging on the terrace with a tall glass, his face flushed from synthestimulant.

Surprisingly, Riskin seemed tonight to be in very good spirits. He was almost jovial as he thrust a glass into Drew's hand.

"Here's to you, Drew," he proposed a little thickly. "That was a clever deal you put over, even if you are from Mars."

"Haven't you had about enough to drink, Vincent?" said Gloria coolly. "The crowd will be wanting to go out after dinner. You'll hardly be able to come along if you persist in making a spectacle of yourself."

"Don't you worry about me, Gloria darling," Riskin replied, winking at her. "I'll be the life of the party tonight."

The other guests were arriving now, and Drew accompanied Gloria as she went to greet them. Drew had met most of the new arrivals before, and they hailed him jovially with humorous references to his Martian background.

They were a gay crowd at dinner, with Jared Shane smiling benevolently from the head of a long silver table in a

room that was like the high-arching interior of a pale-blue scallop shell.

"Drew, do you have dining tables on Mars, or do you just squat down in the desert and eat?" Vincent Riskin asked gravely.

Drew bristled inwardly at the deliberately insulting question, but managed to keep his temper. "We're not quite as uncivilized as some of you people of Earth seem to think we are."

"Vincent is just joking, Drew," said Jared Shane quickly.

Riskin made a show of contrition. "Sure, I was only joking," he said loudly. "I wouldn't think of offending Drew now that he's our partner. Partners have to stick together."

Drew was too angry to eat more of the brilliant jellies and liquids, and his appetite was not enhanced by the fact that Gloria was sitting next to Riskin on the opposite side of the table, and that the vice-president kept whispering in her ear.

He felt relieved when the dinner ended, and Jared Shane bade them good night in his pleasant way.

But they were no sooner outside than a clamor of argument arose among the party and he found himself becoming angry again.

"I'm sick of the Submarine Club and the Sky Club," Gloria said, as one of the guests insisted they follow the agreed-upon plans for the evening.

Vincent Riskin shook his head. "Listen, I've got a better idea. Something brand new. How about a tour of Little Mars, conducted by a real Martian? I mean, of course, our good friend, Drew."

"Say, that's a swell idea!" enthusiastically cried a slightly intoxicated youth in the forefront of the throng. He button-holed Stephen Drew eagerly. "You'll do it, won't you, Drew? You can speak Martian, and—"

"Drew can not only speak Martian," Riskin interrupted. "He has friends in Little Mars. In fact, he lived there himself up until a few days ago. With him as a guide, it should be a real experience."

Riskin was eying him with a triumphant half-sneer on his face, as the clamor of the crowd supported the idea with enthusiasm.

Suddenly Gloria was beside him, clinging to his arm.

"Come on, Stephen—say you'll do it! We'd all enjoy seeing Little Mars with you to guide us."

"But, Gloria, you don't understand! The Martians down there are my friends. They're not curiosities to be stared at!"

"I know, but they won't resent your just taking us through the place," she pleaded. "Please, Stephen—as a favor to me."

"All right," he said, and could have bitten his tongue out.

Drew's doubts about the wisdom of what he was doing increased rapidly as they sped through the towering city in two rocket-cars. The loud hilarity of the others grated on him.

His dread increased even more sharply as they drew near to Little Mars.

When they approached the entrance of the domed Martian colony, Stephen Drew turned toward the others.

"It's pretty cold in here for Earthmen," he said warningly.

"That's all right, Drew. We've all brought our cloaks," Riskin said smugly. "Lead on."

The narrow, dusky streets of the Martian colony were quiet, and the few Martians in the thoroughfares glanced with impassive faces at the noisy Earth party. But Drew read in those somber red faces an active dislike for the sightseeing Terrestrials.

"Look at that cute little inn at the end of the street!" Gloria exclaimed. "Let's go in, and get some real Martian wine."

Drew's heart sank. She was pointing at Th' Rulu's hostelry. Reluctantly, he accompanied them down the street. Th' Rulu himself and the grave Kor brothers and Az Akarau, the jeweler, were sitting outside drinking kian wine.

"*Qua vo kebas*, Ark Avul!" Th' Rulu greeted Drew. "May the two moons favor you."

"Where is Lin L'Lan?" Drew asked Dri Kor anxiously, as the party pressed forward gaily on both sides of him. "He's still here, isn't he?"

"*Sao*, Ark Avul," murmured the tall young Martian gravely. "I will tell him you are here."

Drew's companions had begun to seat themselves, laughing at the queer backless chairs. They made wry faces over the yellow kian wine Th' Rulu served them.

"It doesn't taste like synthestimulant, Stephen," laughed Gloria.

"Probably it goes good with lizard meat out on Mars," said Vincent Riskin. "Eh, Drew?"

Drew had no chance to make a retort. Lin L'Lan was coming out of the inn. The old Martian's wrinkled red face was eager at first, but it clouded into a disapproving mask as he glanced over the babbling, laughing crowd.

"So these are your new friends, Ark Avul?" said the old man in Martian. "They chatter like canal apes. Why do you bring them here?"

"I didn't want to bring them, L'Lan," he said quickly in Martian. "But they insisted on seeing this place."

Lin L'Lan turned away with an embittered, condemnatory shrug. "I will see you again when you come without these chattering fools, Ark Avul."

Stephen Drew felt unhappy as the old man stalked back into the inn. The Kor brothers and Az Akarau had also withdrawn.

"Let's go somewhere else," Drew said anxiously to the crowd.

He finally got them away from Th' Rulu's inn. But he still felt very uncomfortable as he led them through the quiet stone streets of the colony. They made loud, rude comments on Martian manners, and Riskin kept prodding him with double-edged questions, each veiling a sarcastic reflection on Drew's Martian background. Drew was distressed to see that Gloria laughed at these sallies.

He was glad when the party got bored.

"Now let's fly out to Floating Town for the water-circus!" suggested one of the intoxicated girls as they emerged from Little Mars into the street.

The idea was greeted with a hail of approval from the others.

"I don't think I'll go with you," Drew told Gloria earnestly. "I have something important that I must do."

"All right, Stephen," she said, apparently not much disturbed.

"Can we get off by ourselves tomorrow?"

Gloria smiled a little mechanically. "I'm afraid not, Stephen. But I'll call you up when I'm free."

Profoundly disturbed by her casualness, he watched her and the others glide off in the rocket-cars. Then he turned to

re-enter Little Mars, to apologize to Th' Rulu and the others for the behavior of his companions.

As he started back toward the entrance of the colony, he heard a car pulling up in the street behind him.

There was a sudden loud report and a bursting cloud of pungent gas enveloped him.

He lost consciousness.

VIII

WHEN DREW AWAKENED, his lungs felt sore. He was in a small square room, sitting bound tightly to a metal chair. Opposite him, waiting for him to open his eyes, sat a dark-faced Earthman—Lucas Burdine.

Drew looked around him dazedly, shaking his head to clear it. The walls of the small chamber were blanked out, and only one hanging lamp gleamed off its copper doors and shelves. Near one of the doors, intently watching Stephen Drew, stood a sharp-featured young man. Drew recognized him as the man who had been with Burdine at Little Mars on the night when Lin L'Lan had "nerve-stunned" the pair. Later the same man had attempted to accost him in his hotel.

Drew's gaze swung back to Lucas Burdine. The lean, middle-aged president of synthesesubstances was bending a little forward, his dark eyes steadily trained on Drew's face.

"All right, Staines—you can go now," Burdine said to the young man. The youth nodded and silently departed.

Drew was raging inwardly. But true to his Martian training, he forced himself to remain outwardly calm.

"So you finally got to me, Burdine," he said flatly.

"Drew, I had to take this means of getting you to listen to me," Burdine said earnestly. "Ever since you reached Earth, I've been trying to see you. The first time we met you half-killed me before I had a chance to talk. And when I went down with Staines to Little Mars to look for you, somebody stunned both of us in some devilish fashion. Later, I sent Staines to you with a message, but Gilson's two men knocked him out. Only one recourse remained—

to have Staines over-power you with a harmless gas pellet and bring you here. Luckily, Gilson's two guards didn't seem to be shadowing you tonight."

Stephen Drew strained futilely at the cords which bound him to the chair and rendered him helpless.

"I'll release you as soon as you've had a chance to listen to me, Drew," said Lucas Burdine earnestly. "You've got to listen to my proposition."

"Burdine, you're wasting your time," Drew assured him. "Your plan to have my tranium concession revoked hasn't a chance of success, now that I've got Transmutation behind me."

Burdine looked dumfounded. "My plan to have your concession revoked? What are you talking about?"

"You know very well what I'm talking about. You've been trying to get the Government to revoke my concession, so that you could claim it."

"Why, that's the silliest nonsense I ever heard!" Burdine's face suddenly grew pale. "Just what did you mean when you said you had Transmutation behind you?"

"It's true. My tranium mine has been incorporated as a subsidiary of Transmutation. All Jared Shane's influence is behind me now. He'll keep my concession from being revoked."

The effect of his statement on Lucas Burdine was crushing. The president of Synthesubstances seemed overwhelmed by the information. "You did that?" he said thickly. "Then Transmutation has won out. Shane has got me licked."

"You see?" Drew said, keeping his voice level. "I told you you were wasting your time. Your plot to get a tranium monopoly is smashed."

Burdine looked at him with haggard, unseeing eyes. Then he laughed, jarringly—a mirthless sound. "You poor fool. You poor greenhorn from Mars. You don't even realize yet what's happened."

"I realize that the profiteering monopoly on synthefoods you were scheming for is all finished."

"You think that, do you? Well, I'll tell you the truth. There is such a tranium monopoly right now. Transmutation has it! They control every source of tranium, now that they have their hands on your mine. My company will be squeezed out for lack of tranium. And Transmutation will achieve a stranglehold on synthefood production."

Stephen Drew smiled unbelievably. "Do you imagine I'll believe that? I happen to know you've bought up all other tranium sources except mine—through dummy companies."

"You fool! Its Transmutation that's been buying up the tranium mines through dummy companies! That's why I was so frantic to get your mine—to keep from being deprived of tranium altogether. But Shane was too clever for me."

"You're lying," Drew said accusingly. "Those dummy companies are yours. Gilson told me all about it."

"Walter Gilson told you that, did he?" Burdine narrowed his eyes. "I get the whole clever set-up, now. Jared Shane and Riskin certainly beat me to it every way. They were smart enough to have your own agent in their pay before you came to Earth—to make their scheme letter-perfect."

He saw Drew's coldly incredulous expression, but refused to be stopped by it.

"Don't believe that, do you? Well, consider this. Who told you all those lies about my wanting a monopoly? Who steered you to Jared Shane, and told you Shane would help you fight me? Who approved this sucker-agreement in which you signed your mine away to Shane's company? Walter Gilson, wasn't it?"

Stephen Drew's confidence was wavering now. It was true, he thought suddenly—all his information had come from Gilson. He had taken Gilson's word because the man had been Drew's agent for eight years.

"Gilson didn't want you to see me, because he knew you'd learn the truth from me. That's why Gilson had bodyguards follow you—to keep me from contacting you until the deal could go through. Now that Shane has your mine, they're not afraid any more. That's why your two bodyguards are no longer shadowing you."

Drew felt a little tremor of apprehension, despite himself. Suppose Lucas Burdine was telling the truth? Suppose he had really signed away his mine?

He thrust down the suspicion as ugly and baseless. "You're merely trying to get me to break with Shane. And it won't work. I know who my friends are."

"Sure you do," said Burdine. "You're the smart young man from Mars who came here and outwitted the big Earth financiers, aren't you? I'm sorry for you when you wake up, Drew."

He cut Drew's bonds. "You can go," he said listlessly. "I'd advise you to have a good time before the mountain falls on you."

Drew strode out of the room, his thoughts in a turmoil. He found his way to the street and discovered that he was in the massive downtown section of the super-city. Dawn was breaking. He started toward his hotel, resolutely dismissing Burdine's statements from his mind. Then, quite suddenly, he came to a decision.

"I'll go see Gilson and tell him," he said, aloud to himself. "He'll soon expose the whole thing for the vicious lie it really is."

He felt relieved by his own resolution as he made his way toward Walter Gilson's office. But when he reached it, he found the door was locked.

He was looking around in bewilderment when one of the building attendants came along the corridor, and noticed him standing there.

"Mr. Gilson hasn't arrived yet," the attendant said. "I can let you into his office if you want to wait for him. I know it's all right because I've seen you go in and out with him a lot lately."

The man produced an electrokey, and used its tuned beam to actuate the complex lock. He let Drew into the office. "Mr. Gilson should be here any moment," he said as he departed. "He's later than usual today."

Drew waited twenty minutes and then his impatience got the better of him. He decided to call Gilson's hotel on the televisior. A moment later, the polite face of an immaculate clerk looked out at him inquiringly from the screen.

"I want to talk to Mr. Walter Gilson."

"Sorry, sir, but Mr. Gilson has just checked out," said the clerk.

"Where did he go?"

"I don't know, sir. I think he left on a trip."

Drew turned off the televisior and sat, staring dismally at the wall. Where could Gilson have gone?

He searched the address file, with the vague hope of discovering some clue as to where Gilson had gone. He found nothing. But he did find one address that gave him pause—the home address of Jo Duff.

A moment later he was dialing her number. He felt a

queer sensation of relief when the girl secretary's blonde head and pert face appeared in the screen.

Jo recognized him and greeted him with pleased surprise. "Hello there, Martian! Long time no see. Come to think of it though, it couldn't have been more than a week."

"Jo, I heard about you being discharged and I was sorry. But even though you're not working for Walter Gilson now, I wonder if you could tell me where he has gone? I want to see him."

Jo's blue eyes grew instantly serious. "What's wrong, Martian?"

He hesitated. "Well, I guess it's really nothing. But Lucas Burdine got hold of me just now and made a lot of charges that my agreement with Transmutation wasn't straight. I know he was probably lying. But I'd like to see Walter Gilson about it."

"Listen, Martian, I don't know where my ex-boss is. But you wait down there at his office until I can get there. I've been wanting to talk to you, anyway."

She disappeared from the televisor. A little bewildered, Stephen Drew turned off the instrument. He paced the offices restlessly until the door opened and the trim figure of the girl secretary appeared.

Jo wasted no time. "Tell me everything that Lucas Burdine told you."

Haltingly, Stephen Drew did so. When he had finished Jo said, "Martian, I think Burdine was telling you the truth!"

"No, I can't believe it. Jared Shane wouldn't do anything underhanded like that to a friend."

Jo looked at him pityingly. "Do you remember me telling you once that this planet should be known as the World of the Double Cross? How do you think Shane and his crowd built up Transmutation into just about the biggest synthefood company on Earth? These financial wolves here would knife their own grandmothers for a profit."

She continued rapidly. "Martian, I began to suspect dirty work a couple of days ago. I'd heard enough of what Gilson told you to get some idea of the deal that was going on. And it didn't seem entirely logical to me that a smaller company like Synthesubstances could really be threatening to squeeze out Transmutation—the biggest synthefood corporation of all. I thought I'd find out just what was going

on, and started to do a little snooping in my boss's files."

"But why would you take a risk like that just to help me, Jo?" Drew asked wonderingly.

Jo flushed a little. "What difference does that make? I guess—well, I guess I just hated the idea of a helpless Martian greenhorn like you being pushed around. Anyway, I didn't get anywhere, for Gilson caught me snooping and fired me. But since then, I've been asking around, and I've found that most people believe the dummy corporations that are monopolizing tranium are controlled by Transmutation."

"I still can't believe it. Gilson wouldn't deceive me like that. Why, he was my father's agent for eight years!"

"Listen, Martian, I know that chubby little crook better than you. If Shane's crowd offered him a big enough bribe to sell you down the river, he'd break his neck jumping at the chance."

"But you don't realize—"

"Where's your copy of this agreement you signed with Transmutation?" she asked suddenly. "I want to see it."

"It's in my rooms."

"All right. Let's get it."

Stephen Drew felt still a little dazed as he and Jo Duff hurried on the fastest motilator-band through the crowded, whirring streets. When they reached Drew's hotel apartment, he anxiously brought out the contract for Jo's inspection.

She sat down and poured over the document, her pert face wrinkled in a deep frown of concentration. Drew waited worriedly.

Jo finally looked up at him.

"Well?" he asked anxiously.

"Martian, didn't you read this thing when you signed it?" she asked incredulously.

"Why, no. I wouldn't have understood all those legal phrases. But Walter Gilson read it and said it was all right."

"I'll say it's all right—all right for Jared Shane's outfit. This incorporates your tranium mine as a subsidiary of Transmutation. You are to hold title to all the stock in the subsidiary company."

"Well, that still leaves me owning my mine, doesn't it?" Drew said hopefully.

"Yes, but here's the joker in the contract. There's a conversion clause down there at the bottom. It states that the

board of directors of the parent corporation—that means Shane and his stooges—shall have power at any time to convert the subsidiary tranium company into an outright property of Transmutation's, and repay you for your subsidiary company stock by an equal number of shares of Transmutation."

"What does that mean?"

"You poor babe from Mars," exclaimed Jo pityingly. "It means that Shane can take over full ownership of your tranium mine, and pay you off with some of his watered Transmutation stock that would be worth only a small fraction of the value of your mine."

"Take over the ownership!" Drew stared at her incredulously. "You mean my Martian friends would be working for strange Earthmen?"

Jo nodded soberly. "That's what's going to happen, Martian. Shane's neatly swindled you out of your mine by this agreement. And now Gilson's gone off to spend whatever bribe Shane's crowd gave him. He wouldn't want to be around here in case you found out the truth."

"So that's how it is! I trusted him, and he deceived me from the first."

He straightened suddenly, his hands knotting into fists. "Gilson and Jared Shane. I can't believe Gloria's father would do that to me. But if he did—Jo, I'm going to go to him and demand an explanation. I'm going to force a showdown right now!"

IX

DREW'S MIND was feverish with impatience as the rocket-car threaded the thronging streets and ramps and underground boulevards. When it reached the deep underground Plant One of Transmutation, he told the driver to wait and hurried from the parking court through the maze of tiled tunnels.

Vincent Riskin was sitting at his desk in the outer office when Drew entered breathlessly. The young vice-president frowned.

"What do you want, Drew?"

"I've got to see Mr. Shane at once," Drew said. "There's something important I must discuss with him. Please tell him I'm here."

"That's quite impossible," said Riskin. "You have no appointment, and Shane is one of the busiest men on Earth. You know that as well as I do."

"But I told you that this is important!" Drew took the contract from his pocket. "It's about the agreement I signed. There's a clause in it that shouldn't be there, a clause that could be used to deprive me of my rights. I want to straighten it out."

Vincent Riskin's face remained bland and unperturbed. "I don't know what you're talking about, Drew. You signed an agreement with us of your own free will. As far as we're concerned, the deal is closed."

"It's not closed," said Drew, his anger rising. "By the two moons, I'll—"

"That will be all, Drew."

Two men had quietly entered the office, and were standing directly behind Drew. One of them held a gas pistol, which he jabbed warningly against Drew's spine.

"Came along, mister. Better go quietly," he said.

Despite his fierce resentment Drew had the good sense to realize that there was nothing to be gained by a struggle with Riskin that might well prevent him from getting at the complete truth. A gas pellet would stun him before he could force his way in to Jared Shane.

Out in the parking court, Drew gave his waiting driver the address of the Shane sun-palace. As the rocket-car traveled back up through the ramps and boulevards, he could scarcely restrain his impatience and leaned forward twice to urge the driver to increase his speed.

Twenty minutes later a private rocket-lift shot him up through the entire vertical length of the huge truncated pyramid which bore upon its summit the garden-mansion of the Shanes. He rang persistently until the door opened, and a smooth-faced man servant confronted him.

"I want to see Miss Gloria Shane at once," Drew said brushing determinedly past the man.

"Miss Gloria is still sleeping," said the servant, trying to bar his way.

"Then wake her! She won't mind. Tell her it's important."

Doubtfully, the servant withdrew. As he waited, Drew restlessly paced the soft green turf, the beauty of this miraculous garden in the sky completely lost on him now.

When Gloria finally appeared she was wearing a pale green, shimmering synthesilk robe, and her dark eyes were still sleepy.

She greeted him without warmth. "Stephen, did you have to wake me up at this hour? I'm really terribly tired. We didn't get back from Floating Town until morning."

He took her small hands in his. "Gloria, I need your help! The contract I signed with your father is—all wrong. I didn't find out until today. I know your father wouldn't have *purposely* drawn up such an agreement. But I couldn't get in to see him, and explain—"

Gloria's brows contracted in a slight frown. "But, Stephen, I don't know anything about business. I never even talk about it. It's all just a dull, complex mess of figures to me."

Drew did not smile. "This is serious, Gloria! I want you to come back with me and talk to your father. He must see me. I couldn't get any satisfaction from Vincent Riskin. I'm quite certain he's in this plot to swindle me."

Her smile disappeared. "Do you realize what you're saying? Accusing Vincent of dishonesty!"

"It's the truth!" Drew said. "Judging by the way he acted, Riskin must have known that I suspected him."

Gloria drew back angrily. "Vincent is my oldest friend! How dare you come here and say such things about him?"

Drew was amazed. "Gloria, surely you believe me? The man you love—"

"You are taking too much for granted. What makes you so sure I'm in love with you?"

"But you acted as though you were," Drew said, staring hard at her. "We were talking about getting married."

"You were talking about getting married. I never dreamed you meant it seriously, that it was anything more than a romantic whim."

Fear clutched at Stephen Drew's heart. He stepped forward impulsively and took her into his arms. "Gloria, you can't mean that—"

With a furious little movement, she broke free from him. "Keep your hands off me, you Martian savage! If there's one thing I don't like, it's being mauled." Her lips were suddenly white. "I don't want you to bother me again,

understand? I suggest you go back to Mars where you'll be better appreciated."

Drew could not remember later how he got down to the street. He moved in a black trance along the canyons of gigantic pyramids, carried along by the motilator he had mechanically boarded.

It was late afternoon when he finally returned to his rooms, after blindly riding the motilators for hours. Jo Duff hastened toward him, her small figure tense with apprehension.

"Martian, where have you been all this time? I've been half out of my mind with worry."

Drew sat down heavily. "You were telling the truth, Jo. Shane and Riskin were both swindling me along with Gilson. Shane wouldn't even see me."

"I expected as much," Jo said dryly. "What did Gloria say about it?"

"She asked me not to bother her again. She's tired of playing around with a Martian savage."

Jo Duff uttered an angry exclamation. "That sleek, hollow-headed little witch. She would say something like that."

Jo's eyes softened. "Don't take it so hard, Martian. She was bound to take you over the bumps sooner or later. I warned you days ago, remember? The thing for you to do now is to forget about her and fight back hard."

Jo paced back and forth, undiscouraged by his silence. "What you must do is get Lucas Burdine's help on this," she said. "You can institute some sort of suit against Transmutation which will delay their taking over your mine—"

She stopped. Drew had risen, and his face had a dark, strange, determined look that was unfamiliar to her.

"Martian, what have you got on your mind?"

Drew looked at her somberly. "Jo, you remember that first time in Gilson's office—when I attacked Lucas Burdine because I thought he was my enemy. Remember what you said to me then?"

"Why, I told you that you couldn't go around here using direct action on your enemies—"

"That's right. You and Gilson said I would have to forget about Martian methods and do things the Earth way." His voice rang bitterly. "Well, I've tried the Earth way. And I've been hopelessly out-tricked, for I've been dealing with Earthmen who are skilled in treachery."

Drew drew in his breath sharply. "I'm going back to what I know, Jo. I'm going back to Martian methods now!"

Jo Duff looked at him in alarm. "Martian, what are you planning? You can't use force and violence on these men. It might work on wild Mars but it won't work here. You'll only get into worse trouble."

Drew gently pressed her hand and moved toward the door.

"Where are you going, Stephen?"

"To Little Mars first. To my friends—my real friends. I'll show Shane and his crowd what a Martian savage can do. I'll show them how we deal with enemies in the Martian way!"

X

BLACK SHADOWS bunched thick in Little Mars, for night had come. The thin, wailing notes of a pipe skirled through the quiet, dark stone streets as Stephen Drew hastened toward the inn. Beside old Lin L'Lan, the stalwart Kor brothers and Az Akarau rose and looked silently at Drew as he approached.

Drew did not hurry into speech as an Earthman would have done. He felt all Martian now. Deliberately, he murmured the formal greeting.

"I ask the pardon of all of you for bringing those Earth people here last night," he said.

"It is forgotten, Ark Avul," replied Th' Rulu. "We know that Earth people will never understand our ways."

"Nor do I understand their ways," Drew said bitterly. "I thought that I did. And I know now they have tricked me since the day I came here. The mine by the Great Southwest Canal is no longer ours."

"*Raq kebas!*" rasped old Lin L'Lan. "By the two moons, do you mean that we must go back to Mars and tell our people that strange Earthmen now will rule them?"

"No, L'Lan. I will never go back with such a tale. The mine is ours. I have been tricked out of it, but I intend to get it back, with your help."

L'Lan's black eyes flashed. "Now you speak like Ark Avul again!"

"What do you intend to do?" ask Az Akarau, the little jeweler.

"The man Jared Shane has a paper which I was tricked into signing. I shall take it from him—and also do another thing."

"The man Shane is powerful, Ark Avul," said Th' Rulu gravely. "Overcoming and defeating him will not be easy."

"I know that," Drew said quietly. "L'Lan, I want you to help me in one small detail which will involve no danger for you. And from you, Koh Kor, I wish to borrow a hunting noose and dagger."

Koh Kor and Dri Kor, the two brothers, looked at each other. Then Dri Kor spoke. "We'll do more than that, Ark Avul. We are hunters by trade. We'll help you hunt your Earthman enemy!"

Drew experienced a sudden, deep, heart-warming gratefulness. This was Martian friendship, Martian loyalty. To reject it would be the deepest of affronts.

"You'll need a rocket-car, will you not?" Az Akarau said eagerly. "I know where I can get one, and I know how to drive it."

"How do you propose to reach the man Shane?" Th' Rulu asked gravely. "He dwells in one of the sun-palaces."

Drew looked at the Kors. "Clan-brothers, you have done hypnotic hunting of rock-dragons that laired high in cliffs, have you not?"

Koh Kor nodded, grinning.

"We shall hunt this Earthman in the same way," Drew said grimly. "Here is my plan. Listen carefully, all of you."

An hour later, a rocket-car purred quietly into the parking court of the colossal pyramid which rose in many-storied splendor to Jared Shane's mansion. It edged unobtrusively toward the shadows at the back of the crowded court.

Stephen Drew peered intently from the front seat beside Az Akarau, the driver. In a whisper, he pointed out to L'Lan and the Kors the small private foyer, which was occupied now by two smartly uniformed attendants.

"The rocket-lift is the private way up to Shane's sun-palace," Drew said, "but unfortunately those attendants are equipped with gas pistols. We must see that it does not become too great a misfortune."

"They'll not get a chance to use their weapons, unless my hands have lost their cunning," grinned Koh Kor.

"L'Lan, you will remain here in the car with Az Akarau," Drew said. "You will prevent anyone from going up after us."

He and the Kor brothers quietly emerged from the rocket-car and started silently around the edge of the parking court, keeping in the shadows of torpedo-shaped vehicles wherever possible.

Drew held in his left hand the Martian hunting noose of silvery wire attached to a short metal staff. In his belt was a hunting knife. The firmness of the familiar weapons gave him a feeling of confidence. Koh Kor and Dri Kor were similarly armed.

They crouched for a few minutes in the shadows of a vehicle, their eyes alert as the two attendants emerged from the foyer and took two cars away.

"*Ni-da rikao!*" murmured Drew tautly. "Rush them!"

He had known that in this semi-public place he could not risk attempting to overcome the attendants hypnotically. He and the Kors leaped out, their silvery nooses whirling like streaks of light.

The attendants gaped for a moment in unbelieving horror at the spectacle of two red Martians and a taut-faced young Earthman charging straight toward them out of the shadows. Then the whirling nooses caught them.

They tripped and went down. The silver-wire coils tangled around their arms and legs, and Stephen Drew leaped with the quickness of a sand-cat toward the nearest one. An expert touch of his fingers upon the man's neck silenced him.

Drew whipped around and saw that Koh Kor had already overcome the other attendant with a similar nerve-stunning pressure.

"This hunting is too easy to be fun, Ark Avul," whispered Koh Kor.

"Do not harm them. Drag them back into the shadows," Drew said.

That done, he raced with the two Martians into the silver car of the rocket-lift. Its controls were simple, for it had been designed only to serve the sun-palace at the summit. Drew touched the ascension button.

The car shot swiftly upward and stopped automatically. Drew gently opened the metal door a crack and peered out.

Serene and lovely in the full moon lay the blossoming sky-garden of Jared Shane. The shimmering bubble of the mansion glowed through the trees like a great pearl. From it toward the lift-entrance came a servant, summoned by an automatic signal.

Dri Kor's noose whirled and leaped, and the servant was quickly overpowered, and just as quickly silenced.

"This is like knocking down pimus birds," whispered Dri Kor as he straightened.

"There are at least two more servants here," Drew said. "We must make sure of them before we—careful, here they come now!"

All human obstacles had been removed when Drew and the two Kor brothers stepped silently into the blue sea-shell dining hall.

There were three people seated at the long silver table—Jared Shane, Vincent Riskin and Gloria. The girl, lovely in a clinging white silken suit, sat facing the door by which Drew had entered.

Her dark eyes went very wide as she saw Stephen Drew's grim, tight-lipped face and the two red Martians towering up behind him.

"Father! Vincent!" she cried, her voice tremulous with shock.

Riskin's face went blank with surprise. But Jared Shane's distinguished countenance turned a sudden gray. "Why, Drew!" he exclaimed after a moment, smiling uncertainly as he arose. "I'm glad to see you."

"What do you mean—glad to see him?" exclaimed Riskin angrily. "What the devil does he mean by bursting in here with those Martians?"

"Now, Vincent, that's no way to talk," Shane said. His hand was surreptitiously pressing the silver plate at the table's end.

"You need not bother calling the servants, Shane," Drew said. "They're unconscious, and will remain so for hours."

"What the blazes is this?" Vincent Riskin blustered. "If you think you can force your way in here—" He was moving belligerently toward Drew, his fists clenched. Drew hardly seemed to move. Yet the noose in his hand flashed like a living thing. It circled Riskin's neck and sent the man to the floor, choking and strangling.

Contemptuously, Drew unwhipped the noose with a deft

movement, freeing Riskin. The vice-president staggered dazedly to his feet.

"There are some things that a Martian savage can do better than an Earthman, Riskin," said Drew, without raising his voice.

Gloria's eyes were wide dark pools of fear, her voice a whisper. "You're not going to kill us, Stephen?"

"My name is Ark Avul," Drew said stonily.

His somber gaze returned to Jared Shane. The magnate, despite his pallor, was slowly regaining his self-control.

"Shane, I needn't waste words," said Drew. "You tricked me into signing that agreement. You planned the whole thing with Riskin and Walter Gilson a long time ago. It was my father whom you first planned to swindle. That's why you had Gilson send him the message that the concession was in danger of being revoked. You wanted him to come to Earth and you could swindle him.

"But my father died—partly because of worry caused by your lying message. And when you heard that I was coming in his stead, you were no doubt glad because you knew that it would be far easier to cheat a 'Martian savage' than a scoundrel like Riskin here. And it *was* easy—ridiculously so. You deceived me from first to last. But you forgot one thing. You forgot that a Martian might go back to his own way of dealing with his enemies."

Jared Shane tightened his lips. "I admit nothing, Drew. The contract you signed was a perfectly legal agreement. You cannot break it."

"Where is your copy of that contract now?"

Jared Shane made no answer, facing them in obstinate silence. Drew and Dri Kor and Koh Kor stared into his unflinching eyes.

Then Drew hurled the hypnotic suggestion, with all the mental force that he had learned since childhood to use in hypnotic hunting.

"You will tell me," he thought, over and over. "You will tell me."

Beside him, the two Martian brothers were hurling similar thought commands.

Gradually Shane's powerful face began to look a little dazed, his keen gray eyes a little dulled. His almost impregnable defenses were going down before the combined mental assault.

"The—the contract is in our vault down at the offices," he stammered thickly.

"Where are the documents detailing your control over the dummy tranium companies?" Stephen Drew demanded swiftly.

"They are in the office vault also," muttered the hypnotized man.

Drew turned slightly toward his Martian comrades. He indicated Gloria Shane and Riskin by a slight nod.

"*Dase kwull imm*," he said. "Make them remain here for awhile."

The Kor brothers advanced swiftly around the table. Gloria recoiled with a little cry of terror.

"You will not be harmed," Drew told her. "But you must be unconscious for a few hours."

He watched grimly as a touch of Dri Kor's expert fingers sent her sinking to the floor in a crumpled heap. Koh Kor had already disposed of the half-stunned Riskin.

Jared Shane was beginning to come out of the mind-crippling trance. He looked around dazedly.

"You are going down with us to the offices of Transmutation and open the vault," Drew said mercilessly.

"I won't do it! You can't get away with this, Drew!"

"Shall we use the Thousand Touches upon him, Ark Avul?" asked Koh Kor grimly.

"It is not necessary. We can force him," Drew replied. "You will go with us willingly, Shanel!"

Once again there was a weird hypnotic assault by the three trained Martian minds upon the half-dazed Earthman. And again, Jared Shane's will faltered.

"I will go with you as your friend," he mumbled thickly.

They went to the rocket-lift. As they shot downward, Dri Kor and his brother kept facing Shane, continuing the hypnotic suggestion.

The lift stopped. Drew opened the door first and looked out tensely. A slender, familiar figure came flying toward him.

"Jo, what are you doing here?" he asked sharply.

Jo Duff's lips were white. "Martian, I came to talk you out of this crazy attempt! It may cost you your life!" Then she caught sight of Jared Shane's dazed face. "Where are you taking him?"

"We have caught him as we would catch a sand-cat on

Mars," Drew said coolly. "He is going down to his offices with us."

"No, Martian—you can't deal with him so harshly. Even though you might succeed in getting your contract back, Shane will send you to Lunar Prison for life."

Lin L'Lan came hurrying toward Drew. "It is dangerous to remain longer here, Ark Avull!" warned the old servant.

"We go now," Drew said. "Come along, Jo."

In the rocket-car, the Kors sat in the back with the dazed magnate. Drew muttered a word of instruction to Az Akarau as he, L'Lan and Jo climbed into the front seat. The vehicle whirled smoothly away.

Thirty minutes later the car glided quietly into the parking court of the underground plant.

"This is the most dangerous place," Stephen Drew said quietly to his comrades. "There are many clerks and technicians here. All together now."

He told Jared Shane firmly, "We are your friends and you are taking us into your office. We are your friends."

Jared Shane walked a little stumblingly with them through the busy tunnels, his face rigidly set. The technicians they passed stared with respectful curiosity at the magnate and his strange companions.

An amazed-looking official greeted them in astonishment as they entered the labyrinth of offices. "Why, Mr. Shane, we didn't expect you at this hour!"

"These are my friends," said Jared Shane mechanically. "I am taking them to my office."

The official stood aside and looked wonderingly after them. When they entered Shane's office, the magnate seated himself automatically. Drew and the four Martians faced him across his beryllium desk.

"You will have brought to you the contract that I signed, and the documents that give you control of the dummy tranium companies," Drew explained.

Shane did not resist. He fumbled at a switch of the television and spoke dully into it. "Carlson! Go to the vault and bring me all our tranium contracts."

A few moments later the official came in with the papers, deposited them on the desk and, with a puzzled backward glance, departed.

"Now call the telenews services and ask them to send me

to take an important announcement you wish to make," Drew went on relentlessly.

Shane did so, mechanically.

Jo Duff regarded Drew with fear in her eyes. "Martian, what in the world do you think you're doing?"

Drew took the contract which he had been duped into signing and dropped it into the waste-destroyer behind the desk. As he touched the button of the mechanism, its gush of atomic force reduced the document to thin ash.

"Jo, I want you to make out a deed transferring title of all these dummy tranium companies to the System Government," he said.

Jo was just completing the document when the official returned, looking more puzzled than ever.

"Some telenews men are here, Mr. Shane."

"Have them come in," Stephen Drew said quietly.

The newsmen hastily entered, carrying their portable view-screens. They regarded Shane and the others with curious glances.

"Mr. Shane has asked me to speak for him," Drew said coolly. "He wishes to broadcast a statement important to everyone on Earth. Mr. Shane has planned a great altruistic action. He believes that the control of the tranium supply should not be vested in individuals, since upon tranium depends the synthefood production so vital to Earth. He considers that the tranium supply should be administered solely by the System Government.

"For that reason, he has been buying up control of the scattered tranium companies on Mars. He is now about to transfer title to all those companies to the System Government, so that hereafter all tranium that comes to Earth will be distributed with strict fairness by the Government to all the synthefood corporations."

A babble of excited voices rose from the telenews men.

"Mr. Shane, this is magnificent! It's the greatest gift ever made Earth's peoples!"

Drew leaned across the desk. "Mr. Shane, it is time for you to sign this transfer of title now. Your action is being recorded by the telenews."

Jared Shane's blank gaze met his eyes. The minds of Stephen Drew and of his four Martian companions battered at him in invisible assault.

"You will sign!" Drew thought, sweating. "Sign!"

No ordinary hypnotism known to Earthmen could have forced Jared Shane to perform an act so opposed to his conscious desires. But he was powerless against the strange technique developed by a thousand generations of Martians.

Shane's hand reached stiffly for the slim electropen. He scrawled his signature at the bottom of the deed, in a bold, indelible crimson.

"The titles to those dummy companies were in Mr. Shane's own name and therefore his signature is enough to transfer them," Drew told the invisible audiences quietly. "I am transferring control of the tranium shipped from my own mine to the Government also. I am retaining only my right to exclusive management of my mine. By this act Mr. Shane gives the Government exclusive control of tranium."

Drew nodded to the telenews men to go off the air.

When the excited telenews men had departed, Stephen Drew swung about in relief and nodded to Lin L'Lan and the others.

"Release him now."

Jared Shane came slowly out of the hypnotic daze. That his conscious mind had been aware all along of what he had been forced to do was confirmed by his first furious outburst of rage and frustration.

"You Martian devils!" he choked. "The deal won't stand. I'll tell the whole world how you forced me to sign away my rights by your devilish Martian hypnotism!"

"You can do that, yes," Stephen Drew said gravely. "You might even be able to convince the courts that it is true."

"You bet I'll convince them! You and your cursed friends will go to Lunar Prison for life!"

"But how," asked Drew grimly, "will you explain precisely why you secretly acquired those tranium companies in the first place. They think now you did it so that you could present them altruistically to the Government. If you deny that, what reason will you give for acquiring them? Will you be able to tell them the truth—that you were plotting to get a tranium monopoly?"

"He can't tell that!" Jo Duff exclaimed excitedly. "If he did, he'd have to admit he was planning to get a stranglehold on synthefood production through a tranium monopoly. The people of Earth would tear Transmutation to shreds!"

Jared Shane's face stiffened in fierce rebelliousness for an instant. Then he sank back in his chair, stricken by sudden realization. "By Heaven, it's the truth. There's no way I can explain away those dummy companies—now that the whole world knows about them. No way, except by letting this phony deal go through."

"You lose the monopoly you coveted, and the money you spent trying to get it," Drew told him ironically. "But you'll be famous now as Jared Shane, the man of broad vision, the great altruist!"

He turned to Jo and his silent Martian companions. "We've nothing more to do here, let us go."

Jared Shane surprised him. He stood up with a grim smile upon his powerful face. "You win, Drew," he said quietly. "I like a hard fighter, and you are one—in your own crazy way. I wish now we could be friends."

"I have had enough of Earth for the rest of my life," Drew said somberly. "I'm going home."

New York spaceport was crowded two days later. The *Algol* was taking off for Mars at noon, and that was only minutes away. Last-minute bales of cargo were being swung into the hold of the towering, upright space-liner. Officers were shouting orders, whistles screeched, passengers struggled through the dense throng toward the gangway.

Stephen Drew stood in the sunlight, tall in his black leather Martian garments. He and Lin L'Lan were uttering the grave, formal farewells to the Martian friends.

"I think it is good for you to go back, Ark Avul," said Th' Rulu wisely. "Earth is a grand and glittering world, but the desert-dweller's heart calls homeward."

"*Sao*," said little Az Akarau wistfully. "I would like to see the two moons rise again before I die."

Suddenly through the noisy crowd Drew glimpsed a familiar blonde head. He waved his hand, and heard a well remembered greeting.

"Hi, Martian!"

Jo Duff was breathless when she reached them. And her face had an unwonted shyness in it as she faced Stephen Drew. "Aren't you going to kiss a girl goodbye?"

Her lips were quivering and sweet under his, and it was difficult for him to let go of her.

"Why, Jo, you're crying!"

"I am not," she said. "Well, only a little—"

A blind compulsion made Drew's arms close tightly around her. He was stunned by what he felt. "Why, Jo, I don't want to lose you!" he stammered.

Her eyes were shining. She buried her head on his shoulder. "You and me both, Martian," she murmured. "Why do you suppose I was always worrying about you, you big mug?"

"Ten minutes to take-off!" a mechanical announcer blared through the din of the crowd. "All passengers aboard!"

"Sure, and I'll probably get a little tired of it sometimes and threaten to leave you," Jo said. "But there's one thing I'm sure of right now. I'm going with you!"

Lin L'Lan's voice came impatiently. "*Ytri sal nir kwa latan, Ark Avul. Qua brebu da thar!*"

"Is Laughing Boy objecting to me?" said Jo belligerently.

"He says that you still talk far too much, that you are the right woman for me," Drew said.

"Good for Laughing Boy! I can see where we're going to be pals. Come on, Martian, or we'll miss our ship."

Drew started with her toward the gangway and then stopped again as a new thought struck him. "But, Jo, you can't go like this, without any of your things."

"That's what you think," she said. "Everything I own is right on that ship. You didn't really think I would let you get away without me, did you?"

THE END

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